

REWRITING THE NOSTALGIC STORY:
WOMAN, DESIRE, NARRATIVE

By

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This dissertation interrogates the nostalgic story, which has been a favorite in the Western literary tradition since Homer's paradigmatic tale of nostalgia, the Odyssey. Interpreting nostalgia etymologically to mean the longing to return home, this dissertation suggests that the traditional story of nostalgia may be alienating to woman who has historically remained, physically as well as psychically, in the home, and it argues that certain contemporary women writers are critiquing and rewriting the nostalgic story.

Chapter One, "The Subject of Desire in Feminist Theory," situates this dissertation within the context of current issues in feminist theory, namely, the problem of defining woman. Chapter Two, "There's No Place Like Home: Toward a Psychoanalytic Theory of Nostalgia," traces the pattern of Oedipal desire in popular narratives of

nostalgia, The Wizard of Oz and Terry Gilliam's Brazil, in order to show how alienating such narratives may be to woman.

Chapter Three, "Nostalgia and Marilynne Robinson's Discontent," discusses Marilynne Robinson's revision of the nostalgic story in her novel Housekeeping, and Chapter Four, "Longing to Long: Kathy Acker and the Politics of Pain," discusses Kathy Acker's representation of the pain that is caused by woman's alienation from the traditional nostalgic story.

INTRODUCTION

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
--Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas"

This dissertation is about the stories that we tell, as individuals and as cultures, to explain loss, and it is about the difference between the stories that men tell and the stories that women tell.

I am fond of explaining my own loss in terms of the following narrative.

Until I was eight years old, I lived happily in an Edenic Southern California, where the sun would shine every day, where our lawn of dichondria, which my mother watered and weeded daily, never needed cutting, where I spent every day on my skateboard or in a swimming pool. One day in December 1967 we flew across the world to live in Bangkok, where I saw wounded soldiers flown in from Saigon hospitals, rabid dogs in the streets, and limbless lepers on "skateboards" outside the cathedral. I knew then that my world would never be the same, and now I dream nostalgically for a moment before December 1967, a moment that probably was never as perfect as it seems to me now.

More specifically, then, this dissertation is about the nostalgic stories that we tell to explain loss.

Etymologically, nostalgia means "the longing to return home." This metaphoric "home" of nostalgic desire means something different for each individual (for me, my Southern California home where lemon trees blossomed in my backyard), but it is often figured as a return to some maternal figure (traced in my memory as the image of my mother watering the lawn). This study began, quite frankly, with my desire to understand my own nostalgia, which led me to interrogate the nostalgic narratives of our culture, beginning with Homer's Odyssey, the paradigmatic tale of nostalgia in our Western literary tradition. Odysseus, having ventured away from home, longs for a return to the maternal figure of Penelope. Some of our favorite twentieth-century stories of nostalgia are structured by this simple plot. For instance, Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, travels somewhere over the rainbow and longs to return home to Kansas. This simple nostalgic plot is complicated by the impossibility of return, which is figured as a metaphoric castration, a fact which raises the issue of gender and nostalgia. I am asking in this dissertation, in what ways is gender implicated in nostalgic narratives of loss?

My discussion of nostalgia is situated within the context of what contemporary feminist theory has said about the relationship between gender, desire, and narrative. If

narrative is generated by desire, feminist theory has asked, then whose desire are we speaking of? The nostalgic stories that some male writers tell are generated by an Oedipal desire, marked by images of castration. Considering Teresa de Lauretis's argument that the Oedipal desire that informs male narratives alienates the feminine subject, I began to wonder whether that Oedipal logic common to nostalgic stories by men might complicate nostalgic stories by women. I discovered that the nostalgic myth may be just as alienating for men as it is for women, yet that alienation is expressed differently.

I then turned to representations of nostalgia in writing by women, which led me to the work of Marilynne Robinson, whose entire corpus may be read as a critique of what she terms "the nostalgic fallacy." I read her novel Housekeeping as a revision of the nostalgic story, in that Robinson creates an extraordinary character who lives "outside" of loss, who refuses to long for a nostalgic return. Yet Robinson's novel may be a utopian revision of the nostalgic story, possible only in fiction. Kathy Acker in her postmodern novel Don Quixote offers a revision of the nostalgic story that is different from Robinson's revision, one that represents, perhaps more realistically, the psychic pain involved in giving up the belief in the possibility of return. My interest in these chapters on Robinson and Acker is not only to explicate their texts, but more importantly,

to use them in order to illustrate the tensions between the nostalgic story and the feminine subject.

I am intellectually indebted to Teresa de Lauretis, whose ideas about gender, desire, and narrative have profoundly informed my own, particularly her discussion of the alienating effects of "male" narratives of desire on "female" subjects in Alice Doesn't, and most importantly, her notion of a view from "elsewhere" developed in Technologies of Gender. However, my work is less semiotic and more psychoanalytic than that of de Lauretis. I understand questions of desire, gender, and narrative, which I pursue in relation to nostalgia, to be, more broadly, questions about subjectivity--the subject of desire, the gendered subject, the subject who listens to and tells stories. Consequently, my methodology in the following pages is psychoanalytic, since psychoanalysis offers a thorough and rigorous theory of subjectivity.

De Lauretis, like some other feminist theorists (Irigaray in particular), rejects Lacanian psychoanalysis for erasing woman beneath the hegemonic phallic signifier:

In the psychoanalytic view of signification, subject processes are essentially phallic; that is to say, they are subject processes insofar as they are instituted in a fixed order of language--the symbolic--by the function of castration. Again female sexuality is negated, assimilated to the male's, with the phallus representing the autonomy of desire (of language) in respect to a matter which is the female body. (Alice Doesn't 23).

De Lauretis argues that Lacanian psychoanalysis valorizes the phallus which "represents the autonomy of desire." More accurately, for Lacan the phallus is a mark of lack, although it is nonetheless imbued with symbolic power within culture, which is what feminism, along with Lacanian psychoanalysis, has been arguing. My point is that Lacanian psychoanalysis cannot be easily dismissed as misogynist; instead, feminism may exploit Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize the female subject, which is what I argue in Chapter One.

When speaking of gender, one inevitably confronts a problem of terminology. The terms "masculine" and "feminine" I take to describe a way of being, arbitrarily defined within the contexts of culture and family. The terms "male" and "female" I take to describe sexual difference as biologically defined. I follow de Lauretis's useful distinction between Woman and women: "By 'woman' I mean a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures" and "by women, on the other hand, I will mean the real historical beings" (Alice Doesn't 5).

Finally, this dissertation might be read as a sequel to Janice Doane and Devon Hodges' book Nostalgia and Sexual Difference, which treats only works written by men. Doane and Hodges argue that several contemporary works of fiction and non-fiction written by men nostalgically long for a

moment before the women's movement challenged the "naturalness" of gender distinctions. They conclude their book with this inviting final sentence: "By embracing the subversive possibilities of language, feminist theorists can undermine nostalgic rhetoric, leaving cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity in play, rather than in place" (142). Whereas Doane and Hodges are concerned with "nostalgic rhetoric," I shift the issue of nostalgia to one of desire. I hope that this dissertation at least shows precisely how the nostalgic rhetoric, as well as desire, is subverted in women's writing.

In Chapter One, "The Subject of Desire in Feminist Theory," I situate my study within the context of current issues in feminist theory, namely, the problem of defining woman. In Chapter Two, "There's No Place Like Home: Toward a Psychoanalytic Theory of Nostalgia," I trace the pattern of Oedipal desire in popular narratives of nostalgia, The Wizard of Oz and Terry Gilliam's Brazil, in order to show how alienating such narratives may be to woman. In Chapter Three, "Nostalgia and Marilynne Robinson's Discontent," I discuss Marilynne Robinson's revision of the nostalgic story in her novel Housekeeping, and in Chapter Four, "Longing to Long: Kathy Acker and the Politics of Pain," I discuss Kathy Acker's representation of the pain that is caused by woman's alienation from the traditional nostalgic story.

The questions that I ask about the representation of nostalgia in the work of Robinson and Acker might also be asked about the fiction of lesbian and black women writers. I suggest at the end of Chapter Two that a woman's nostalgic desire may be expressed through lesbian desire, but I have yet to explore adequately the implications of this idea. Having argued that nostalgic desire, with its Oedipal quest for origins and its images of castration, is a masculine desire, I certainly do not mean to suggest that lesbian desire is simply an enactment of a masculine fantasy. On the contrary, the lesbian expression of nostalgic desire may be as subversive as Robinson's or Acker's critique of that desire. Nevertheless, the issue of sexuality and nostalgia is complicated in that revisions of the nostalgic story such as Robinson and Acker give us tend to exclude the possibility of a normative heterosexual relation. Robinson leaves the issue of sexuality entirely out of her rewriting of the nostalgic story, while Acker seems to conclude that there is no successful sexual relation, either heterosexual or lesbian. Could it be that with respect to nostalgic desire, the heterosexual relation amounts to a paradox for woman who, like man, longs for the lost territory of the mother's body but must look for that territory in the body of a man? It may be that woman transcends that paradox through the lesbian expression of nostalgic desire,

although, of course, as in any nostalgic gesture, she never recovers that maternal plenitude.

Since the nostalgic desire has been imaged as a return to maternal presence, we would expect that nostalgia might be represented differently by black women writers for whom the mother and child relation may have a culturally different status and meaning. Toni Morrison's novels, in particular, represent the painful separation of mother and child, and the impossibility of return. But in Morrison's novels, the separation occurs, not only as the inevitable course of psychic development, but more painfully at the hands of the mother herself: pressured by a hostile dominant culture, mothers kill their children in Morrison's stories. At one point in Morrison's Sula Nel hides away in her bathroom. The scene exemplifies the nostalgic desire for an Eden, a place outside the loss that comes with change:

'The real hell of Hell is that it is forever.' Sula said that. She said doing anything forever and ever was hell. Nel didn't understand it then, but now in the bathroom, trying to feel, she thought, 'If I could be sure that I could stay here in this small white room with the dirty tile and water gurgling in the pipes and my head on the cool rim of this bathtub and never have to go out the door, I would be happy. If I could be certain that I never had to get up and flush the toilet, go in the kitchen, watch my children grow up and die, see my food chewed on my plate . . . Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change.' Not only did men leave and children grow up and die, but even the misery didn't last. One day she wouldn't even have that. This very grief that had twisted her into a curve on the floor and played her would be gone. She would lose that too. (108)

This dissertation is about the loss that generates stories about the longing to return to a place outside change, such as Nel's bathroom or my Southern California existence. It is about the anguish of realizing the impossibility of returning to such a place, and about the difference between the way men and women express that anguish.

CHAPTER ONE
THE SUBJECT OF DESIRE IN FEMINIST THEORY

Lear: . . . What shall you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sister? Speak.
Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

When King Lear asks his daughter Cordelia to prove in words that she loves him in order to gain a third of his kingdom, she confounds her father by refusing to speak of love according to his terms. "What shall Cordelia speak?" she asks. "Love and be silent." Cordelia refuses to identify with her father, unlike her sisters Regan and Goneril, who identify with Lear by imitating his discourse, which speaks of love as a system of weights and balances. But Cordelia will pay with her life for her silence, her refusal to enter into the symbolic order that her father's discourse exemplifies. Cordelia's defiant response to her father's demand dramatizes the dilemma that each feminine subject has in relation to a patriarchal discourse.

Cordelia's dilemma anticipates a philosophical dilemma that has preoccupied virtually every post-structuralist feminist in recent years: can a woman "answer" the patriarchy in its terms without eradicating her own identity

as a woman? If subjectivity is constructed by the effects of family and culture, and if family and culture are contaminated---indeed, constructed--by male biases and assumptions, then how can an authentically female subject come into being? In other words, how can a woman come into subjectivity as a woman in a language that defines woman as, and in fact is itself, a reflection of masculine desire? In the last fifteen to twenty years psychoanalytic feminism has emerged to ask such questions about female subjectivity, focusing especially on hysterical desire as representing the dilemma that every female subject encounters. Because for most of this century feminism had rejected or modified the tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis, the recent alliance between feminism and psychoanalysis may seem enigmatic to some feminist critics. In this chapter, I will justify this recent alliance by showing how feminist theory exploits psychoanalysis in order to talk about the female subject. I will specifically consider the significance of the issue of hysterical desire in feminist theory, and I will introduce the issue of nostalgic desire, which deserves as much attention from feminist theorists as the problem of hysterical desire, but until now has not been theorized.

The Subject in Feminist Theory

Significantly, feminist theorists who have posed philosophical questions about female subjectivity have been specifically psychoanalytic, rather than primarily Marxist,

Derridean, or semiotic. None of these theories has yet posited as thorough and rigorous a theory of subjectivity as psychoanalysis has.¹ Marxism has historically been more concerned with the "desire" (caused by economy) of groups of subjects, than with that of the individual subject,² and semiotics, as Kaja Silverman has pointed out, has focussed with few exceptions entirely on a system of signs divorced from the human unconscious. Derrida rejects a theory of subjectivity, because such a theory remains "inside the logocentric, that is phonologistic, field that [he] undertook to delimit and to shake" (Positions 108n).³ More

¹ Although I realize that the problem of human subjectivity has been the concern of philosophy since its inception, I am more interested in discussing the major theories of the twentieth century because I am concerned with the relationship between feminism and a theory of subjectivity. For an informative survey of "the evolution of subjectivity in the Western tradition from the medieval period to the present," see Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis, 1-67. Paul Smith's recent book, Discerning the Subject, discusses the place of subjectivity within the major humanistic theories of this century, including Marxism, semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and feminism.

² The debate about whether or not the tenets of Marxism and a theory of subjectivity are compatible has centered on the question of cause: does the economy cause the human subject, or does the unconscious? In his article "Psychoanalysis and Marxism," Ernesto Laclau argues that psychoanalysis adds a theory of subjectivity to Marxism, and that the cause of the subject is neither the unconscious nor the economy, but both.

³ Perhaps the most heated debate is now being waged between Derridean theorists and Lacanian psychoanalysts concerning this problem of theorizing subjectivity. One of Derrida's most lucid attacks on psychoanalysis appears in this long footnote (perhaps suggesting that the argument deserves only a footnote). He rejects psychoanalysis

generally, Derrida rejects a theory of subjectivity that rests on the belief that a human subject can completely express the truth of his or her past, because such a theory depends on concepts of "full speech, truth, and presence," all of which he claims to have deconstructed (Positions 108n). Furthermore, because Derrida has deconstructed the western metaphysical notion of presence, he has necessarily deconstructed the "presence" of an unconscious and, it follows, any theory of subjectivity.

It is no wonder, then, that feminism has turned to psychoanalysis for a theory of subjectivity, rather than to Marxism, semiotics, or deconstruction. I do not mean to suggest that these theories have nothing to offer feminism. In her book Sexuality and the Field of Vision, Jacqueline Rose argues persuasively for the confluence of feminism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, considering that human identity cannot be viewed apart from sexual identity, which cannot be viewed apart from a political context. Rejecting Derrida's challenge to any theory of "subjecthood," Rose describes the intersections of these three theoretical concerns. She argues that feminism added "sexuality to the historically established links between psychoanalysis and the understanding of how ideology works" (7). In doing so,

because of its reliance on a telos of 'full speech,' its dependence on a Hegelian conceptuality, its references to the "authority of phonology," and its uncritical attention to "the letter," specifically, Freud's written word.

feminism provided the common ground, sexual difference, for Marxism and psychoanalysis to unite. According to Rose, "it is rather as if the theoretical/clinical debate about female sexuality and the more explicitly Marxist debate about ideology and its forms were historically severed from each other--at least until feminism itself forged, or rather demonstrated, the links" (8).

While Marxism through its critique of ideology has given feminism a theory of political resistance, psychoanalysis has, of course, given feminism a theory of subjectivity. Thus, as Paul Smith argues in his book Discerning the Subject, feminism (specifically, psychoanalytic feminism) has been the only theory that offers both a theory of the gendered subject and a theory of the political subject--that is, a theory of a human subject created in culture yet able to resist that culture's dominance. Yet these two concerns--sexual difference and political resistance--seem to have led feminist theory to an apparent impasse, an impasse that we are now in the midst of negotiating.

The Double Split in Feminist Theory

As so many critics have pointed out, feminism these days seems split down the middle between Anglo-Americans on one side, French feminists on the other; essentialists on one side, deconstructionists on the other; pragmatists on one side, theorists on the other; political resistance on

one side, sexual difference on the other. The misperception that the feminist debate has only two sides has led to at least two unfortunate misunderstandings. First of all, since, as Derrida has said, every opposition implies a hierarchy, this apparent ideological split in feminism has been interpreted as the theoretically naive on one side versus the theoretically sophisticated on the other.⁴ Second, we have tended to simplify the issues and positions of the debate so that we have ignored the subtle but important differences among critics on both sides of the Atlantic. I would like to survey briefly several sides of what I consider to be the central debate within feminism today, trying not to simplify the issues and arguments involved in this very complex question of woman's subjectivity.

The debate in feminist theory has centered on the question, What is a woman? Specifically, what does it mean to be a woman in patriarchy? Teresa de Lauretis, as we saw, distinguishes between "woman" as a "fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures" and "women" as "real historical beings who

⁴ For an Anglo-American view of the debate, see Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," or Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine." And for a French feminist view, see Chapter Two, "Feminist Tracks," in Alice Jardine's Gynesis, or Toril Moi's introduction to Sexual / Textual Politics.

cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations" (Alice Doesn't 5). It seems that the split in women's subjectivity that de Lauretis describes has manifested itself as a split in feminist theory, which poses the question of defining woman in either/or terms: Is woman essentially, naturally born into the world, some feminists ask, or, other feminists ask, is she formed by culture?

In an effort to affirm woman's identity, which historically has not found self-expression in a male-dominated culture, some American feminists have argued that "woman" exists not only as a cultural construct but as a material, biological, and psychological being whose specific experience deserves to be recognized, validated, and authorized. Yet this argument has led certain feminists to conclude that women are essentially nurturing and peace-loving: their experiences, in short, read as essence. This is a conclusion which other feminists have rejected because of the oppressive, normative model of womanhood such essentialism suggests, and which has been used historically against women. In her article "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," Linda Alcoff notes that for Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly, "it is our specifically female anatomy that is the primary constituent of our identity and the source of our female essence" (410). Alcoff then rejects such essentialism not only because it is "factually and

philosophically indefensible" but because it may "'reflect and reproduce dominant cultural assumptions about women,' which not only fail to represent the variety in women's lives but promote unrealistic expectations about 'normal' female behavior that most of us cannot satisfy" (413).⁵

Influenced by both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean theory, French feminists have argued that a woman is not born but made within a male culture and language that is not her own.⁶ Thus, if a woman can exist only as a reflection of masculine desire and language, the argument goes, then there can be no essential woman. By far the most affirmative of the French feminists, Hélène Cixous proposes

⁵ Here Alcoff quotes Alice Echols, 439-459. In her discussion of Rich and Daly, Alcoff draws heavily on Echols' work, using the name "cultural feminism" that Echols gives to the trend toward essentialism within feminism. In my opinion, the term is misleading since it suggests that "cultural feminists" would be more interested in the cultural influences rather than the natural influences on the making of a woman, which is not so for the feminists that she calls "cultural."

⁶ I am well aware that there is no single, unified French feminist theory, even though the first anthology of French feminists, New French Feminisms, may have suggested such unity to the American audience it wanted to reach. Although I recognize the plurality of theories among these theorists, for my purposes here it is necessary to ignore for the most part the differences, however significant, between Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, the major representatives of what has come to be known in the United States as "French feminist theory." Elissa D. Gelfand and Virginia Thorndike Hules have compiled an indispensable annotated bibliography of French feminist criticism; Claire Duchon has written a history of the French feminist movement that clarifies the different political positions within the movement.

an answer to the dilemma by celebrating a feminine language that subverts the dominant discourse. She says, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring woman to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. . . ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 875).⁷ Woman comes into being, according to Cixous, by writing herself into being in an other language, a pure language that is not polluted by "masculine" desire.

Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, influenced by Derrida who deconstructs the category of woman throughout his work but particularly in Spurs, have not been so affirmative or utopian in their treatment of the question of woman's subjectivity. For these theorists, woman does not exist at all, except as a social construct. In an early interview, Julia Kristeva says that "a woman cannot 'be'; it is

⁷ The French feminists, particularly Cixous, have been criticized for their biological essentialism, a fact which illustrates the complexity of this apparently two-sided debate. Ann Rosalind Jones critiques the French feminist notion of écriture féminine, writing from the body, on these grounds in her article "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine" in Showalter, 361-377. But there is a difference between the essentialism of some American feminists and the so-called essentialism of French feminists. For French feminists, "masculine" and "feminine" are floating signifiers that do not necessarily describe the text of a biological male and a biological female respectively. In other words, a male author such as James Joyce (about whom Cixous wrote her dissertation) may write a feminine text, just as a female author may write a masculine text. As far as I am concerned in this study, the descriptions "masculine" and "feminine" are not in themselves very useful since they are loaded with troublesome, inescapable cultural connotations.

something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.' In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (Marks and de Courtivron 137). According to Kristeva, any definition of woman, any assertion of woman's identity, whether patriarchal or feminist, is not only inappropriate but imperialistic. When the question--are you a woman?--is put directly to Luce Irigaray, she answers from a position in which being and subjectivity have been deconstructed:

There is one question, however, that I should like to examine at the outset. Moreover, it is the first question, and all the others lead back to it.

It is this one: "Are you a woman?"

A typical question.

A man's question? I don't think that a woman--unless she has been assimilated to masculine, and more specifically phallic, models--would ask me that question.

Because "I" am not "I," I am not, I am not one.
(This Sex Which is Not One 120)

Irigaray rejects subjectivity ("I' am not 'I'"), she rejects an ontology based on a Western metaphysics of being ("I am not"), and she rejects the illusion of subjective wholeness or unity ("I am not one").

Many feminists, especially American feminists, have pointed out the political consequences of negating woman's identity. The French feminist deconstruction of woman's

identity can easily be seen as a gesture by privileged academic women who have the luxury to argue that woman does not exist. As Linda Alcoff asks, "What can we demand in the name of women if 'women' do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do? How can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is a fiction? How can we demand legal abortions, adequate child care, or wages based on comparable worth without invoking a concept of 'woman'?" (420).

Like Alcoff, Nancy Miller fears that the post-structuralist impulse (specifically as it is represented in Foucault and Barthes) to deconstruct subjectivity and authorship has threatened the Anglo-American feminist project to "reconstruct" female identity, which has been historically ignored in the artistic and technical productions of patriarchal culture. Miller says that

the postmodernist decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, and hence decentered, "disoriginated," deinstitutionalized, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, is structurally different.

("Changing the Subject" 106)

While Miller's point is well-taken, that the goals of post-structuralism and the goals of political feminism may be

seriously at odds, she does not offer a means to theorize, to reconstruct, the female subject into being. In other words, it is difficult to argue that a woman's relation to desire and authority "is structurally different" without a theory of subjectivity that explains the difference. Yet Miller ignores the theoretical support that a psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity would lend her argument.

"What's a Feminist to Do?"

It would seem that in the last fifteen years or so feminism has trudged into the quicksand of an impossible either-or debate: an academic feminist today is either politically correct and theoretically naive, or theoretically sophisticated and politically incorrect. Is there no way out of this dilemma? Can we have a practical, political feminism that is supported by psychoanalytic theory, and a psychoanalytic feminist theory of subjectivity that serves the political interests and needs of feminism? Only very recently have feminists explored the possible alternatives to the impasse in which we have found ourselves. Paul Smith, for instance, believes that the division between French feminist theory and American feminist practice "is becoming less and less clear and that, indeed, feminism's current strength resides in its coming to terms with the tensions and contradictions produced by having within itself both these manners of thinking" (135).

Smith's argument against Marxism, deconstruction, and

semiotics is that they either fail to account for the subject, or they propose an abstracted, purely theoretical subject that is unified and centered. According to Smith, the strength of contemporary feminist theory is that it presents a theory of a subject that is not merely abstracted and theoretical but embroiled in political realities and exigencies that make a unified, centered subject impossible: the split in the female subject is created by the fact that woman, as we have seen, is both a real, historical being and a fictional construct. Far from being debilitating or stultifying, the split in feminism that is generated by the split in female subjectivity marks it as the one theory that, because of its contradictions, accounts for a subject (or "agent," in Smith's terms) that is able to resist the discourse that makes her because she is self-consciously aware of her own making.⁸

Smith shows that the two sides of feminist theory, the "American" impulse to reconstruct female subjectivity, and the "French" impulse to call into question such reconstruction, serve the political interests of feminism, allowing feminism to assert a female subject at the same time as it critiques the patriarchal fashioning of that

⁸ Smith distinguishes between the terms individual, subject, and agent. "Individual" suggests an illusion of a whole, coherent personality, "subject" describes the many positions one occupies in relation to the world's discourses that subject one, and "agent" suggests the possibility of resistance to ideological pressure and subjection.

subject. Smith concludes that "the effect of feminism's double-play is demonstrably to have broken down the old habit of presuming the 'subject' as the fixed guarantor of a given epistemological formation, as well as to have cast doubt on the adequacy of the poststructuralist shibboleth of the decentered 'subject'" (151).

A Third Course for Feminist Theory?

Whereas Smith defends the contradictions within feminist theory, Linda Alcoff argues that feminism "cannot simply embrace the paradox," so she proposes that feminism "transcend the dilemma by developing a third course," one which navigates between essentialism and deconstruction. Following Teresa de Lauretis's argument in Alice Doesn't, Alcoff argues that if a woman's identity is always in process of coming into being, then she can resist the pressures of the dominant ideology that influence the formation of her identity. Rejecting psychoanalysis, Alcoff champions instead the theory of "identity politics" which views identity as a construct but also as a point of departure for political resistance. She then combines the concept of identity politics with "a conception of the subject as positionality," in which woman chooses her own position within the network of power relations. Alcoff's article, which appeared in the Spring 1988 issue of Signs, deserves close critical analysis because it represents some

of the traps that are set for us as we try to work our way out of the theoretical impasse we have found ourselves in.

First of all, Alcoff's reasons for rejecting psychoanalysis are vague and unconvincing. She admits that the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious has led to the post-structuralist conclusion that the subject is a fictional construct. While she concludes that "psychoanalysis alone cannot provide all of the answers we need for a theory of the gendered subject" (430), she does not address the possibility of psychoanalysis and feminism uniting to create such a theory. Alcoff's rejection of psychoanalysis is implicit rather than explicit because she wants to retain one psychoanalytic conclusion (that the human subject is constructed) while rejecting the assumption from which that conclusion is drawn (the theory of the unconscious).

Alcoff must reject any theory of unconscious desire, hence psychoanalysis, because her own theory, her proposed "third course" for feminism, rests entirely on the assumption that a subject can consciously choose her own psychic position in relation to the power structures that frame her. Alcoff concludes that

the concept of positionality allows for a determinate though fluid identity of woman that does not fall into essentialism: woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are 'objectively identifiable.' Seen in this way, being a 'woman' is to take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose

what we make of this position and how we alter this context. From the perspective of that fairly determinate though fluid and mutable position, women can themselves articulate a set of interests and ground a feminist politics. (435)

Alcoff's solution to the feminist dilemma is tempting because it romantically asserts that a woman can consciously resist her own subjective construction and that she has the freedom to choose her position in relation to the cultural and political forces that would form her. The problem with Alcoff's argument is that it loads women with the vague and overwhelming responsibility of creating their own identity: how exactly does a woman make her self? The argument seduces us into ignoring some urgent psychological and political realities about women's position in the world. If we can consciously make our selves, then why do some women repeatedly "choose," for instance, to put themselves in a position of powerlessness? In other words, how can we account for those choices that women make which subject them to psychic pain? Is it because we don't choose our positions as human or gendered subjects, but the position chooses us? Because Alcoff's theory is so abstracted from concrete human experience it cannot serve as a viable "third course" for feminist theory.

Instead of using this theory of woman's fluid and mutable identity to "ground a feminist politics," we must realistically look at the specificity of woman's experience in order to theorize her subjectivity and unconscious

position in relation to the network of power structures that frame her. In particular, I believe that we need to focus on the family structure, in which a woman first learns to position herself in relation to power.⁹ In recent years, the hysteric has emerged as a literal and figurative, real and symbolic, embodiment of the dilemma in contemporary feminist theory because as a daughter she occupies an impossible position in the power network of the family circle.

In Oedipal terms, the female subject is apparently wedged between two poles, father and mother (the Scylla and Charybdis of psychic development), who in Western culture often represent speech and nonspeech, entity and nonentity, empowerment and powerlessness. Obviously, this family configuration is not universal for all women, but it is one which often frames the hysteric. In Dora's case, the most important case history of hysteria for psychoanalytic feminists, Dora is caught in an imaginary (i.e., identificatory) trap between her father, "the dominating

⁹ In her article, "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space," Jessica Benjamin asks the question, "How does it come about that femininity appears inextricably linked to passivity, even to masochism, or that women seek their desire in another, hope to have it recognized and recognizable through the subjectivity of an other?" (85). Benjamin, correctly, aligns the question of desire with the question of power, arguing that the feminist psychoanalytic focus on personal life does not fate us "to surrender the great issues of power" (78).

figure in [the family] circle," and her mother, a "foolish" housewife (Freud, Standard Edition 7: 18). Instead of identifying with her mother, whom she does not respect, Dora identifies with an idealized image of her father, only to have that image smashed when she realizes that her father is having an affair with her beloved friend, Frau K. Rejecting identification with both her father and mother, having no "language" to imitate, Dora suffers "a complete loss of voice."¹⁰ Not all female subjects negotiate their way through the Oedipal dilemma into womanhood in the same manner as the hysteric. Some happily identify with their fathers, others with their mothers, while the hysteric identifies with both and neither, destined to ask over and over, Am I like my father or my mother? Am I a man or am I a woman?

A History of Hysteria

I am aware of the many definitions and uses of the terms "hysteria" and "hysteric," so before considering the significance of hysteria for contemporary feminist theory I would like to clarify my terms. In everyday usage we often

¹⁰ Since Dora's case has just about been picked clean by commentators, it not necessary to go into detail about the case. It is only necessary to summarize the case and conclusions in order to see it as emblematic, and to use it as a means of setting up terms and assumptions that I will use throughout my comments on hysteria. For a thorough analysis of the case, see Bernheimer and Kahane's edition of In Dora's Case: Freud--Hysteria--Feminism, and Ragland-Sullivan's article "Dora and the Name-of-the-Father: The Structure of Hysteria."

use the noun hysteria to denote excessive emotion, while we use the adjective hysterical to describe a fit of excessive emotion. Most of us rarely use the noun hysteric to denote a particular person, and if we do, it is usually considered an insult. Whereas American ego psychology uses the terms "hysteria" and "hysterical," the term "hysteric" is not considered an appropriate diagnostic category. Although he does not define or use the term "hysteric," Charles Rycroft in his Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis defines hysteria generally as a term for an illness with physical symptoms that lack a physical pathology, suggesting that the physical symptoms serve a psychological function (64). The adjective "hysterical," according to Rycroft, describes "a histrionic quality in the patient's behavior" (65).

In their Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders--III, The American Psychiatric Association has dissolved the "ancient concept of hysteria" into three diagnostic categories: conversion disorder, histrionic personality disorder, and brief reactive psychosis, all of which are prevalent mostly among women, although this fact seems inconsequential to the writers of the manual. Conversion disorder, which "was apparently common several decades ago" but "is now rarely encountered," describes physical symptoms with psychological origins (DSM-III-R 257-59). Histrionic personality disorder describes "a pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention-seeking," as

in the case of a woman "overly concerned with physical attractiveness" or "inappropriately sexually seductive in appearance or behavior" (DSM-III-R 349). Finally, brief reactive psychosis describes a momentarily impaired sense of reality, often involving bizarre behavior, "peculiar postures, outlandish dress, screaming, or muteness. . . . Speech may include inarticulate gibberish or repetition of nonsensical phrases" (DSM-III-R 205). All of these symptoms, once centered in the hysteric, have now been dispersed and objectified. The American Psychiatric Association has confined the hysteric to a historical time and place (late nineteenth century Vienna), diluted her symptoms into three ambiguous categories, and wrenched her from the cultural and familial contexts that frame her symptoms. (The manual remarkably offers no information on

"familial patterns" of these diagnostic categories as it does for most other categories in the manual.)¹¹

Although the American Psychiatric Association may not consider hysteria a useful diagnostic category, it certainly has an historical significance for all brands of psychoanalysis. In their dictionary The Language of Psychoanalysis, J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis stress the fact that Jean-Martin Charcot's study of hysteria in the latter half of the nineteenth century eventually led to some of the most important discoveries of psychoanalysis, "the unconscious, phantasy, defensive conflict and repression, identification, transference, etc." (195). Charcot worked with hysterics at the Salpêtrière, a hospital in Paris for mentally ill women, where he began to explain hysteria in more specific and convincing terms than did the popular myths of the time, some of which held that hysteria was a

¹¹ Not all psychiatrists ignore the cultural and familial contexts of "hysterical" disorders. For instance, Jules R. Bemporad et al. have written an exceptional article that considers the cultural and familial influences on the anorexic, a descendant of the hysteric. Using a social historical approach, Edward Shorter argues that the incidence of hysteria may be constant through the ages, but the form of hysteria changes according to cultural contexts. In spite of these exceptions, the psychiatric community seems to treat "hysterical" disorders, not as manifestations of a cultural or familial problem, but as a psychosomatic problem that can be treated with drugs. For instance, in a discussion of globus hystericus (a lump in the throat), Susan R. Brown et al. inexplicably conclude that "on the basis of our experience, when no somatic abnormalities are found, a trial of antidepressants is recommended even in the absence of clinical depression" (918).

woman's disease caused by a condition of her uterus and ovaries. He classified hysterical symptoms and delineated the stages of hysterical fits, believing that hysteria was caused by an "anatomical lesion" in the brain that triggered the neurotic symptom. Charcot's methods were especially theatrical, which perhaps accounts in part for the present day association of hysteria with histrionics. He would hypnotize the hysteric in an amphitheatre where the most influential neurologists of the day, among them Sigmund Freud, looked on. Perhaps because Charcot searched for a physiological source of the hysterical symptom, he tended not to recognize the individuality of each case of hysteria. He was not as interested in listening to each patient's life story as were Freud and his colleague Josef Breuer, who together published Studies on Hysteria in 1895.¹²

Hysteria in Feminist Theory

Thus, it may be argued that psychoanalysis originated with the hysterics, with women, a fact that explains, at least in part, the significance of hysteria for contemporary feminism. The hysteric has, in fact, become an emblem for psychoanalytic feminism, which views her as a victim of patriarchal family and culture, and interprets her symptoms

¹² See George Frederick Drinka's The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady, and the Victorians for a history of the late Victorian study of hysteria. For a briefer discussion of Charcot's work on hysteria, see Charles Bernheimer's introduction to In Dora's Case: Freud--Hysteria--Feminism.

(paralysis, somnambulism, aphasia, among others) as desperate bodily expressions of a rebellion that could not be consciously articulated in words. Significantly, many of the hysterics that Charcot and Freud studied lost their voices, as Dora did, or inexplicably spoke a language which was not their native tongue, as Anna O. did, a fact which several psychoanalytic feminists have interpreted as a conversion symptom with political significance: the mute hysteric, like Cordelia, refuses to speak the oppressor's language.

In a case that resembles that of Freud's Dora, Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim), Breuer's patient whose case history was introduced in Studies on Hysteria, suffered from an inability to articulate coherent sentences, sometimes putting sentences together in several languages at once, and sometimes completely losing the ability to speak. Dianne Hunter sees "a liberating motive" in Anna O.'s symptoms since "speaking coherent German meant integration into a cultural identity [Anna O.] wanted to reject" (92). According to Hunter, hysteria in general "can be considered as a self-repudiating form of feminine discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically" (113-14). Psychoanalytic feminism, Hunter suggests, originated with the hysteric, the woman who "writes" the body by speaking through her body. Dianne Hunter's reading of Anna O.'s case exemplifies the way that

psychoanalytic feminism has resurrected the hysteric as embodying the dilemma of woman's subjectivity. In fact, the hysteric in contemporary feminist theory has become a kind of everywoman who comes into subjectivity in a language that is not her own. "The hysteric is, to my eyes," says Cixous, "the typical woman in all her force" (The Newly Born Woman 154).

Considering its interest in hysteria, it is no wonder that feminist theory in the last fifteen years has been so informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, which has retained hysteria as a legitimate diagnostic category. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, hysteria is one of three ways in which a subject unconsciously positions himself or herself in relation to lack.¹³ Whereas Freud proposes that woman views herself as castrated, Lacan proposes that the subject in general is castrated, lacking "the phallus" which represents whatever it is that the subject thinks will make

¹³ One inevitably confronts a tangle of concepts and terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis when trying to elucidate just one of those concepts or terms. Thus, it is virtually impossible to explain one concept without referring to another concept which demands simultaneous elucidation--a fact which simply reminds us of the complexity of the human subject, whose structure, like Lacanian psychoanalysis, often resembles a set of Chinese boxes. In this sense, Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches the important lesson that once a subject, a psychoanalytic feminist, for instance, believes she has understood once and for all, then she ceases to learn. I realize that in trying to clarify or explain Lacanian psychoanalysis, I am pretending to speak the "master discourse," which is inevitable in a dissertation, a product of the master discourse.

him or her whole. Although the phallus is nothing but a mark of lack, culture nonetheless imbues it with symbolic power. From the moment of castration, the moment the subject becomes a speaking subject, he or she uses language as if he or she could speak her desire. The speaking subject is branded by his or her desire which is, in Lacan's metaphoric terms, "the furrow inscribed in the course; . . . the mark of the iron of the signifier on the shoulder of the speaking subject" (*Écrits* 265). The speaking subject, inscribed by desire, uses language, in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's phrase, "to paper over loss."¹⁴ Speaking from a fundamental lack in being, the subject chases an illusive wholeness, as if an Other (the other that we unconsciously address when we speak) might fulfill our demand. Thus, the crucial question in Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes, How does the subject position herself in relation to lack? How does she use language in order to position herself in relation to lack? In other words, how does she live with her suffering?

According to Lacan, the hysteric unconsciously positions herself so that she remains wanting. The hysteric, in Lacan's words, "can sustain her desire only as

¹⁴ Quoted from a seminar on Lacan conducted by Ellie Ragland-Sullivan at the University of Florida, Spring 1987. Most of my understanding of Lacan comes from what I learned in this seminar and in her Fall 1987 seminar on feminism and psychoanalysis. I am indebted to Ellie Ragland-Sullivan for her teaching of Lacan.

an unsatisfied desire" (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis 12). To this end, she demands more of the Other than the Other can give her, ensuring that she sustains an unsatisfied desire. Because of the hysteric's dependence on the Other not to satisfy her desire, the hysterical structure, as Ragland-Sullivan explains, "depends on guaranteeing the Other of its continuing authority. The hysterical subject is defined, then, as one whose complicitous slavery frames her (his) life" ("Dora and the Name-of-the-Father" 214). For example, Alex Forrest in the popular film Fatal Attraction demands more of Dan Gallagher than he can possibly give her so that she remains enslaved by his power to deny her demand.

Yet as the hysteric guarantees the Other its authority, she simultaneously exposes the impotence of the Other, who cannot fulfill the hysteric's demand. With regard to issues of power, the hysteric embodies a paradox: she is enthralled and enthralls at the same time. In their "exchange" of ideas about Dora's case, Cixous and Clément discuss the ambiguous nature of the power exchange between the hysteric and the Other to whom she addresses her demands. Cixous says that Dora's desire is her strength: "It all starts with her anguish as it relates to desire and to the immensity of her desire--therefore, from her demanding quality. . . . In what she projects as a demand for totality, for strength, for certainty, she makes demands

of others in a manner that is intolerable to them and that prevents their functioning as they function . . . (Newly Born Woman 155). Cixous believes in the revolutionary possibilities of hysterical desire to disrupt the patriarchal structures of family and culture, for example, by exposing the impotence of those structures.

Clément, on the other hand, doubts that hysterical desire can disrupt familial or cultural structures. Clément rejects Cixous's claim that hysteria "disturbs arrangements," arguing that "it introduces dissension, but it doesn't explode anything at all" because it is already assimilated into the system that it attempts to disrupt (Newly Born Woman 156). Once again, we are back to the dialectic that is plaguing feminist theory: can a female subject (in this case, the hysteric) resist the structure that frames her? Cixous believes that she can resist, whereas Clément believes that she cannot. Jane Gallop points out that "rather than assume the ambiguity, the two writers themselves become polarized as advocates of either the hysteric as contesting or the hysteric as conserving" (The Daughter's Seduction 134). For Cixous, Dora is a revolutionary heroine; for Clément, she is a sad victim. Thus, the hysteric embodies the dilemma of female subjectivity that has preoccupied feminist theory in the last fifteen or so years.

Although many psychoanalytic feminists have used Lacan to explain hysteria, some Lacanians have argued that in the hands of psychoanalytic feminists who have been trained as literary critics, not clinicians, hysteria has been emptied of its importance as a clinical diagnosis. Certainly, psychoanalytic feminist critics have moved hysteria from the clinic into the academy, into English and French departments, where it has assumed a symbolic meaning and nearly lost its clinical significance. Jacqueline Rose has warned that we might be "sanitizing the body" of the hysteric by transforming her real, bodily pain into a mere symbol of an ontological moment.¹⁵ Similarly, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan argues powerfully that the story of Dora (Ida Bauer) has been treated as a fiction by some critics, such as Cixous in The Newly Born Woman, who want to avoid confronting and understanding the real psychic pain that she suffers. Ragland-Sullivan says that Ida Bauer's story "is not the story of Woman, but the story of Ida/Dora whose suffering and symptoms are somehow cleaned up, fictionalized, rationalized, tropized and readied for the American marketplace where neurosis itself remains a disturbing word" ("Dora and the Name-of-the-Father" 209). I agree that we must be careful not to romanticize real

¹⁵ I am referring here to a remark that Jacqueline Rose made during a discussion on hysteria at the Conference on Feminism and Psychoanalysis, Illinois State University, May 1986.

psychic pain such as Dora's or Anna O.'s, and that we must remember that while the image of hysteria may symbolize woman's social and political position in patriarchy, the real unconscious effects of hysteria may be socially and politically debilitating.

Yet it is just as debilitating politically not to generalize about women's experience. In order to control the future, we must understand the past, our collective, historical experience as female subjects. And in order to write women's history, we must generalize from the experience of individual women in making statements about all women. To return to Clément and Cixous for a moment, Clément criticizes Cixous for abstracting the hysteric's desire into a symbol of everywoman's desire, an impossible notion for Clément since desire properly belongs to a single human subject. She says that Cixous "describes a sort of collective subject, fictitious, desiring--a huge entity by turns free and revolutionary or subjugated, by turns sleeping or awake. . . . In reality these aren't subjects" (158). But this critique is possible because Cixous's treatment of hysteria is utopian and political--modes of thought concerned with the history of all women--whereas Clément's treatment is individual, concerned with the history of a single subject. Whether Cixous or Clément is correct may be ultimately beside the point because their very argument illustrates the seemingly insoluble dilemma of

the split in feminist theory that the hysteric, representative of the female subject in general, has come to embody.

Desire in Narrative

In order to understand this hysterical double split in female subjectivity, we may turn to narrative where the split manifests itself. That is, we may locate the split in the female subject in narrative, especially when the narrative is constituted, or inscribed, by male desire. I do not speak of narrative as a narratologist would, as a textual entity apart from a perceiving and desiring subject.¹⁶ Teresa de Lauretis identifies the failures of such approaches to narrative:

The problem, I believe, is that many of the current formulations of narrative process fail to see that subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning, and desire; so that the very work of narrativity is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire. Or else they fail to locate the relation of narrative and desire where it takes place, where that relation is materially inscribed--in a field of textual practices. Thus, finally, they fail to envisage a materially, historically, and experientially constituted subject, a subject engendered, we might say, precisely by the process of its engagement in narrative genres. (Alice Doesn't 105-106)

Following de Lauretis, my assumption throughout this dissertation will be that narrative engages the subject just

¹⁶ See, for example, Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," Image--Music--Text, 79-124.

as the subject is engaged in narrative.¹⁷ But we must not mistake, as we have long mistaken, cultural narratives of male desire as reflections of universal, human desire.

Since we can trace the effects of the subject's desire in narrative, the crucial question for feminist theory becomes, whose desire structures the narrative in question? Whose wish does the story seek to gratify? Concerning the story of Oedipus, de Lauretis asks, "But whose desire is it that speaks, and whom does that desire address? The received interpretations of the Oedipus story, Freud's among others, leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social order, and source of mimetic violence . . . (Alice Doesn't 112). Taking the Oedipal story to be "paradigmatic of all narratives," de Lauretis concludes that narrative structured by male desire inevitably maps sexual difference and restricts its readers' identification to two positions: the male hero as subject, and the female as object and landscape for his quest. De Lauretis identifies the split, alienated

¹⁷ That is not to say that all subjectivity is narrativity, an assertion which would preclude any effects of unconscious desire beyond imaginary and symbolic structures such as narrative. In fact, I will take up this issue in depth in Chapter Four of this dissertation, where I am concerned with the disruption of narrative by the real of unconscious desire.

position of female subjects vis à vis the narrative which is structured by male desire. According to this theoretical formulation, the female subject is split between identifying with the male hero-subject and identifying with the female object of his quest. Finally, de Lauretis asks, "Do we have to conclude that all representation of the female subject's desire is hopelessly caught in this nexus of image and narrative, in the web of a male Oedipal logic?" (Alice Doesn't 152). In the following chapters of this dissertation, I would like to take up de Lauretis's question, extending her conclusions about desire, narrative, and gender to an interrogation of one of our culture's favorite narratives--the nostalgic story.

The Nostalgic Story

Nostalgia etymologically derives from the Greek word nostos, meaning the return home, and algos, meaning pain or longing.¹⁸ Thus, nostalgia properly means the longing to return home, the term most likely originating from the story of Odysseus's longing to return home to Ithaka. Every individual has a nostalgic story that represents his or her longing, yet for each nostalgic individual "home" means something different. Nostalgia, then, is the way that a human subject mythologizes (that is, explains through narrative) lack in temporal and spatial terms--the perfect

¹⁸ I am grateful to Henry Sullivan for pointing out the etymology of the term.

moment is always elusively "back then" (e.g., before the Trojan War) or "over there" (e.g., back in Ithaka). In general, for every nostalgic subject, "home," placed elusively in the past or the future, signifies absence, often figured in images of the maternal body.

Given that nostalgia is the longing to return home, then certainly that longing means something different to women who have historically remained already in the home, while men have ventured out into the world. We know all about Odysseus's nostalgia, his longing to return home, but what about Penelope's nostalgia? Feminist theory has yet to explain the problematic psychic relationship between women and the idea of home. How are women writers writing about nostalgia? How do they represent nostalgic desire in their narratives? In what way is the nostalgic story, with its embedded Oedipal logic, alienating to the female reader? And in what ways are hysteria, the longing to long, and nostalgia, the longing for restitution, at odds with each other?

In the next chapter, I will argue that the nostalgic story, taken to be a reflection of universal human experience and desire, is actually a reflection of male desire. Considering that the Oedipal narrative of male desire is embedded within the nostalgic narrative, we would expect the female subject's identification to be split as it is in Oedipal narratives. Thus, in the last two chapters of

this study, I will consider how the crisis in defining women's subjectivity has affected the narrative strategies, metaphors and themes of contemporary women's writing, particularly with respect to the nostalgic narrative. In Chapter Three I will analyze Marilynne Robinson's critique of the nostalgic story and her attempt to rewrite the cultural narrative of nostalgia in her novel Housekeeping. In Chapter Four I will consider the subversion of the nostalgic narrative by the antithetical, hysterical longing to long in the avant garde fiction of Kathy Acker.

CHAPTER TWO
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME:
TOWARD A PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF NOSTALGIA

The unconscious is always cultural and when it talks it tells you your old stories, it tells you the old stories you've heard before because it consists of the repressed of culture.
--Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?"

The nostalgic story has been a favorite in Western literary tradition since Homer's Odyssey, the paradigmatic tale of nostalgia. In this chapter, I will first analyze the way that nostalgic desire has been romanticized for the popular imagination in a twentieth century version of Homer's Odyssey, The Wizard of Oz, which should lead us to a broader, psychoanalytic understanding of nostalgic desire as the way a human subject, or a culture, mythologizes loss. Then, I will ask whether the narrative of nostalgia that we take to be a universal story of human experience and desire is more accurately a reflection of masculine experience and desire, testing my hypothesis against a recent, popular nostalgic narrative, the film Brazil. The nostalgic story about the longing to return home to mother, I will argue, is one of the "technologies of gender" that Teresa de Lauretis says feminist theory should identify and critique.

Dorothy's Lesson

Serving as a simple allegory of the nostalgic subject's quest for home, The Wizard of Oz, Victor Fleming's 1939 version of L. Frank Baum's story, like all good fairy tales, begs for psychoanalytic interpretation.¹ Ostensibly created for children, the film portrays the horrors of the unconscious crystallized in a girl's imagination. Dorothy, the nostalgic subject, has been separated twice from a maternal figure, "abandoned" both by her biological mother and her Aunt Em. Her return home, like that of Homer's Odysseus, is threatened by obstacles which only make her desire grow more intense. In a scene which parallels Odysseus's entrapment by the Lotus-eaters, Dorothy and her companions fall asleep in a field of poppies and nearly forget their longing to return home. Finally, she learns that the Wizard of Oz, the powerful master of plenitude and fantastic phallic signifier, is unveiled as a "castrated" fraud.

¹ Anticipating Freudian interpretations of The Wizard of Oz, the film's producer, Mervyn Leroy, tried to head off "the neurotic probings" of psychoanalytic critics in an editorial published at the time of the film's release. Leroy claimed that the film was simply spun from a child's innocent imagination and had nothing to do with that favorite Freudian preoccupation, sex. See "Director Leroy Explores a Myth," New York Times 13 Aug. 1939. Rpt in New York Times Encyclopedia of Films, 1937-40. New York: Times Books, 1984, n. pag. Harvey R. Greenberg, a psychoanalyst, has written the most thorough psychoanalytic reading of the film, arguing that the images of good witch and bad witch represent images of Good Mother and Bad Mother in Dorothy's psyche.

Before she can return home to Kansas, Dorothy explains what she has learned in the course of her trials "somewhere over the rainbow:"

Tinman: What have you learned, Dorothy?

Dorothy: Well, I think that it . . . it wasn't enough just to want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em. And it's that, if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard, because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with.

With an odd trick of circular logic that would comfort any nostalgic, Dorothy says that if she ever desires anything again, she won't look beyond her "own backyard," because if it's not there, then she never really lost it in the first place. In other words, if the object of one's desire is not in the home, then the object was never desired to begin with. Dorothy's lesson suggests that the totality of home not only satisfies but nullifies nostalgic desire.

Furthermore, Dorothy's lesson is ultimately an attempt to endorse the totality of American domesticity, an attempt which is undercut by the film's return from the brilliant technicolor of Oz to the grim sepia tones of Kansas.

Nevertheless, this image of domestic and psychic totality at the end of The Wizard of Oz significantly contrasts with the many images of lost body parts throughout the film, represented most obviously in the Tin Man's quest for a heart and the Scarecrow's quest for a brain. Yet there are even more terrifying images of lost body parts in

the film: the Scarecrow's straw body is strewn about when the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys try to stomp him to death; the Great Oz is a large disembodied head, ultimately decapitated, or castrated, when Toto pulls the curtain; the feet of the Wicked Witch of the East shrivel up beneath Dorothy's house. ("That's all that's left of her," says Glinda, the Good Witch of the North.) And in Baum's story, the Tin Man loses his limbs and head when his "enchanted" axe cuts them off, after which a tinsmith reconstructs his body. (This explanation for the Tin Man's tinniness was probably considered too gruesome for the movie.)

The threat of emotional, if not bodily, "dismemberment" may have been a public fear in 1939, in the wake of the Great Depression and at a moment when the inevitability of another world war was giving even Hollywood the jitters. But the film's theme, the horror of not being whole and the nostalgic longing for wholeness, has a psychic, as well as historical and cultural significance, which explains why the film has sustained an apparently universal appeal ever since it was released fifty years ago. However, the nightmare of castration images in The Wizard of Oz suggests that the dream is less the product of a little girl's imagination than the product of the imaginations of L. Frank Baum and the eleven male scriptwriters who worked on the film.

Yet, if the film is about male fears of castration, why does it seem to have such a universal appeal? The Wizard of

Oz, in fact, may be one of the most popular American media productions of this century, becoming a ritualized media event when CBS began annual television broadcasts in 1956 and making it the first feature film broadcast on network television.² The fact that the film has been repeatedly broadcast for the last thirty years explains why allusions to the film are instantly recognized, as during a dark rainstorm when someone cries in a high-pitched quavering voice, "Auntie Em! Auntie Em!" or during a moment of unanticipated strangeness someone whispers, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." As one drives east on the Capital Beltway in suburban Maryland, the tall white spires of the Mormon temple, resembling those of the Emerald City, loom into view. On the side of a bridge which crosses the beltway, someone has spray painted the words "Surrender Dorothy!"³

My point is that fragments of The Wizard of Oz have soaked into our cultural memory and discourse (the ruby

² MGM made more than twice as much by leasing the film to television than it made at the box offices. CBS held the contract from 1956 until 1967, then NBC took over the contract. The film returned to CBS in 1976. See Aljean Harmetz's The Making of the Wizard of Oz.

³ I would argue that The Wizard of Oz is a product of an age of "secondary orality," in Walter Ong's terms, an age of electronic orality which depends on writing. In this sense, the film resembles Homer's Odyssey, a product of primary orality. Both The Wizard of Oz and The Odyssey have been disseminated according to an oral tradition, and both are about the nostalgic longing to return home.

slippers are on display in the Smithsonian's Museum of American History in Washington, D. C.), suggesting the appeal of the nostalgic story, so popular among Americans, perhaps because we are a nation of unconsciously homesick immigrants.⁴ Finally, the fact that Fleming's The Wizard of Oz, an allegory of the nostalgic subject's longing to return home, has become a twentieth century cultural phenomenon attests to the power of Dorothy's lesson, the reassuring illusion that the return home is possible. "Time has been powerless to put its kindly philosophy out of fashion," claims the epigraph to the film.⁵

⁴ Admittedly, it is difficult to prove whether Americans are more nostalgic than other nationalities. Yet in an article entitled "Nostalgia and the American," Arthur P. Dudden challenges the claim that Americans are preoccupied with the idea of progress, arguing instead that American history suggests that we are decidedly nostalgic. Dudden cites colonial nostalgia for British control after the Declaration of Independence, nostalgia for the Old Republic during the time of Jacksonian democracy, the nostalgia of Populists and Progressives for an agrarian economy. He concludes that "important segments of the American people, though driven like tumbleweed before the buffeting winds of change and upheaval, attempted to do nothing more than remain where they stood, to keep old ways familiar, even to flee the present and the future into a nostalgically golden yesteryear secluded somewhere far off among remembrances of things past" (517). In The Country and the City Raymond Williams calls attention to the relativeness of identifying nostalgic moments in history, British history in particular. At any moment in history, some segment of a culture longs for an old order. He asks, "Is it anything more than a well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days', as a stick to beat the present?" (11).

⁵ Disneyland and Disney World are monumental symptoms of our nostalgic culture. Disney World recreates the entire world right in our "own backyard," so that we need travel no further than Orlando, Florida, to experience Germany, Morocco, China. Furthermore, like prelapsarian paradise or Oz, everything in Disneyland and Disney World seems so unreal, or "hyperreal" as

Nostalgia and Cultural Longing

The plot structure of The Wizard of Oz resembles that of Homer's Odyssey, one of the master narratives of Western culture: an individual ventures out from home (whether willingly or not), then longs to return home to some maternal presence, a longing which involves a concomitant fear of castration. The nostalgic plot structure is so embedded in our cultural storytelling that it has a mythic--hence, ideological--significance. In this case, nostalgia indicates the melancholy "homesickness" of a culture which tells a nostalgic story to explain a collective loss, in the way that, for instance, the Judeo-Christian culture tells a nostalgic story about a lost Eden, some American Southerners tell a nostalgic story about the Lost Cause, and some feminists tell a nostalgic story about our lost matriarchal origins.

The popularity of this belief in a recuperable, illusionary past has provoked critics who treat nostalgia as a "social disease," drawing on its earliest usage as a "medical" disease, "a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one's home or country; severe

Umberto Eco describes it, borrowing the term from Baudrillard, that nothing is subject to decay or loss. Eco calls Disney World one of America's "cathedrals of iconic reassurance" in his essay "Travels in Hyperreality" in Travels in Hyperreality: Essays (New York: Harcourt, 1986), 3-58.

homesickness" (OED 1945).⁶ Even though today nostalgia is obviously not considered a life-threatening disease for humans, it has retained connotations as a deleterious "disease." As Christopher Lasch points out in his article "The Politics of Nostalgia: Losing History in the Mists of Ideology," "'Nostalgia' was a medical term until this century, and it has never completely lost its pathological overtones" (65).

Cultural critics of nostalgia argue that any culture that believes in the illusion of an idyllic past fails to see honestly its own faults, and consequently remains regressively in one place, pining for a past that never was. Such critics complain about the hegemonic assumption that a culture's nostalgic story reflects the desires of all its members. More specifically, the past that may have seemed

⁶ In his 1688 "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia," Johannes Hofer coins the word "nostalgia" to describe the extreme homesickness of Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home. Fred Davis cites Hofer's article, which was first published in Latin, then translated into English by Carolyn K. Anspach, Bulletin of the History of Medicine 2 (1934): 376-91. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, according to the OED, several physicians treated nostalgia as a disease. In 1786, R. Hamilton in his medical journal refers to the "History of a remarkable Case of Nostalgia," and in 1806, T. Arnold in his book Insanity refers to "a variety of pathetic insanity" usually called "nostalgia." Curiously, in animals and plants, the "disease" was thought to be fatal. In 1842, J. Wilson describes a pond that has "about half-a-dozen trouts, if indeed they have not sickened and died of Nostalgia," and in 1861, the Times describes the concern, presumably of tree specialists, that transplanted trees "might not suffer too much from nostalgia." Thus, nostalgia seems to have been originally treated as a psychological disease, then assumed an organic significance during the nineteenth century.

ideal for a few upper-class, white, heterosexual men was less than ideal for the many under-classes, blacks, homosexuals, and women. Christopher Lasch criticizes both the nostalgic and the anti-nostalgic for equally misunderstanding history: the nostalgic idealizes the past while the anti-nostalgic ignores it. Lasch argues:

Because it is difficult for those who command the mass media, and increasingly for the educated classes in general, to imagine a past that is continuous with the present, they swing between nostalgia and a violent condemnation of nostalgia, both of which betray the same sense of dislocation. Highly susceptible to nostalgia themselves, they are quick to condemn it in others. (70)

Too often, Lasch says, critics of nostalgia are quick to condemn the nostalgic rhetoric of others, without understanding or admitting the complexities of the issue. In their book Nostalgia and Sexual Difference Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue that Lasch himself naively believes in an objectively knowable past: "And since he believes he knows its truth, he believes he cannot be nostalgic. The implication is that we too could see this substantial entity, 'history,' if only we were not lost in foggy polemics and ideological cant" (48). Critiquing Lasch's The Culture of Narcissism, Doane and Hodges proceed to argue that Lasch himself is nostalgic for a time before our twentieth century culture of narcissism. Lasch, they argue, fails to realize that he too, is subject to desire, nostalgic desire.

Instead of simply criticizing the nostalgic rhetoric, Susan Stewart tries to theorize nostalgia, nonetheless treating it as "a social disease" (On Longing ix). Stewart conflates the political and personal meanings of nostalgia, so that it becomes the product of both cultural and individual mythmaking, which arises from the collision of desire, time, and narrative:

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire. . . . [T]he realization of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire. (23)

First, Stewart asserts that nostalgia is ideological because it subjects the past to narrative (which Stewart apparently equates with ideology). Second, nostalgia is hostile to the facts of history yet longs for an "impossibly pure" moment in history; hence, it is ambivalent. Third, nostalgia conflates the past with the future, hoping that the past will be realized in the future; hence, it is utopian. Finally, nostalgia is a desire which desires a past that is absent and lacking, and like a dog chasing its tail, that absence generates nostalgic desire. Because nostalgia only

"works" if it lacks what it wants, Stewart concludes that "nostalgia is the desire for desire."

Stewart's reading of nostalgia situates the ambivalent, utopian desire in culture, yet in doing so she abstracts nostalgia from the individual human subject to the social realm. During a recent discussion of subjectivity and desire, Susan Stewart said that she wanted "a psychoanalysis without a theory of subjectivity."⁷ It occurs to me that when a theorist rejects subjectivity, he or she resorts to recuperating it in different terms, usually by personifying abstractions. In order to recuperate a trace of the human subject, Stewart turns the abstraction itself into a desiring entity by personifying it. Thus, for instance, nostalgia "longs," the narrative "desires," and "the printed word suffers . . . lack" (Stewart 22). Certainly, nostalgia functions at both the individual and cultural level; both individuals and cultures tell nostalgic stories about their past. Keeping in mind the relationship between nostalgic desire, narrative, and time that Stewart theorizes, I would prefer to make a distinction between the individual and cultural realms, rather than conflating the two as Stewart does.

It is not enough simply to discredit the nostalgic story as ideological narrative without understanding how the

⁷ The discussion was conducted at the University of Florida in February 1988.

nostalgic story functions and originates in the psyche of the nostalgic storyteller. Focusing on the way that nostalgia functions at the level of the human subject, I would like to look beneath the nostalgic story to the structure of unconscious desire that gives that narrative meaning, keeping in mind what Lacan has said about the relationship between narrative and desire (the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real Orders). Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains that "Lacan hypothesized that the Oedipal myth (and myth in general) is simply 'the attempt to give epic form to that which operates itself from structure' (Séminaire II, p. 51)" (Jacques Lacan 267). The nostalgic story, like the Oedipal myth, is likewise an attempt to give unconscious desire an epic, or narrative, form. I have defined nostalgia as the way a human subject mythologizes lack, the story that he or she tells about his or her feelings of loss. But if we are to understand the structure of unconscious desire that gives rise to the nostalgic story, we need a psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity.

A Psychoanalysis of Nostalgia and Sexual Difference

Because of its focus on pre-oedipal relations, we might especially expect psychoanalytic feminists who have been influenced by object relations theory to be concerned with the psychological functions of nostalgia. Object relations theory posits a moment of perfect fusion, like Eden, from which the pre-oedipal human subject, like

prelapsarian Adam and Eve, falls. For example, Louise J. Kaplan in her book Oneness and Separateness: From Infant to Individual describes the inevitable longing that a child feels for the earliest bond between infant and mother: "The child will long to restore the primary bliss of oneness, when the harmony inside him was like being an angel baby in the lap of a Madonna" (119). In the terms of object relations theory, "home" for the nostalgic subject is that lost moment of fusion with the mother, an idea which is exemplified by the title of Winnicott's collection of essays, Home is Where We Start From. In the opening of the essay "The Mother's Contribution to Society" Winnicott states: "I suppose that everyone has a paramount interest, a deep, driving propulsion towards something. . . . As for me, I can already see what a big part has been played in my work by the urge to find and to appreciate the ordinary good mother" (123). Starting from home, Winnicott's own career figuratively, nostalgically, takes him back home toward "the ordinary good mother," the subject of most of his writing. Nancy Chodorow, however, proves that "the ordinary good mother" that Winnicott was looking for is constructed by unconscious social conditioning within the family.

In The Reproduction of Mothering Chodorow revises Freud's account of the pre-oedipal phase of psychic development and argues that a girl does not simply and completely transfer her affection from mother to father as a

boy does, because the girl's attachment to the mother is not perceived as a threat to the father-mother relation, and because the mother desires the bond. Citing clinical studies, Chodorow argues that the mother encourages symbiosis with her daughter by treating her as "the self of the mother's fantasy," whereas "boys become the other" (103). Because she maintains a psychic attachment to her mother, a girl develops more "permeable ego boundaries" and "greater relational capacities." Girls, then, carry this ability to merge with an other into their relations with the world.⁸

Although Chodorow does not speak of nostalgia per se, we might successfully extend her feminist theory of object relations toward a psychoanalytic understanding of nostalgia and sexual difference. For Chodorow, as for Winnicott and Kaplan, the human subject is a nostalgic subject: "people come out of [the earliest period of infantile development] with the memory of a unique intimacy which they want to

⁸ Chodorow's theories have significantly influenced the pattern of thought in various areas of feminist inquiry. In her book In a Different Voice Carol Gilligan applies Chodorow's theory to ethics, arguing that girls experience a different moral development from boys. Applying Chodorow's theory to the history of science, Evelyn Fox Keller has argued that because women interact differently from men with the "objective" world, they practice science differently (Reflections on Gender and Science. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985). Similarly, Sherry Turkle in The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit applies Chodorow's theory to her observations about the difference between girls' and boys' interactions with computers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

recreate" (57). In other words, the separation from mother is a kind of psychic venturing out, which creates a nostalgia for intimacy that propels the human subject along until he or she recreates it.⁹ If men separate more abruptly from their mothers than women do, psychically venturing further away from "home," so to speak, we might expect men to be more nostalgic than women.

In fact, several psychological studies suggest that men are more nostalgic than women.¹⁰ In Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia, Fred Davis interprets these studies in sociological terms, claiming that men are more nostalgic because they experience "a more disruptive and discontinuous life passage than do the equivalent and complementary status transitions in the woman's life cycle." According to Davis, "traditionally women's status passages occur in the familiar and reassuring context of home,

⁹ In his Jungian analysis of nostalgia and archetypes of paradise, Mario Jacoby, a psychotherapist, explains human psychic development in terms of nostalgic longing. Jacoby burdens the mother with having "a decisive influence on whether her child's initial experiences savor more of 'Paradise' or of 'Hell'" (viii). According to Jacoby, early in our development we experience a sense of paradise, a "unitary reality," which creates "a nostalgia the intensity of which is in inverse proportion to the amount of external fulfillment encountered in the earliest phase of life" (8). That is, our nostalgic longing will be greater if we were less emotionally satisfied by our mothers as infants.

¹⁰ Fred Davis cites Charles A. A. Zwingmann, "'Heimweh' or 'Nostalgic Reaction': A Conceptual Analysis and Interpretation of a Medico-Psychological Phenomenon," diss., Stanford U, 1959, 151 (Davis 55).

family, and kin, whereas those of men are more likely to involve abrupt shifts of locale, reference group, life style and interpersonal atmospheres" (55-56). In other words, men are more nostalgic than women because they have historically spent most of their time outside the home. Obviously, then, the difference that Davis describes is not a function of biology but of our culture's response to the biological differences between the sexes.

Although Chodorow's theory of object relations accounts for the difference between the nostalgia of men and the nostalgia of women, it unfortunately posits a normative model of human development against which it explains and measures psychological "aberrations." For instance, Chodorow claims that "[w]hen there is some major discrepancy in the early phases between needs and (material and psychological) care, including attention and affection, the person develops a 'basic fault,' an all-pervasive sense, sustained by enormous anxiety, that something is not right, is lacking in her or him" (59). According to Lacanian theory, however, the wish for intimacy, the wish for a perfect fusion between mother and infant, is never more than an illusion of a dream of oneness--and that fact constitutes our alienation and desire.¹¹ The sense of lack that

¹¹ In Lacanian terms, the norm, which Chodorow posits, is itself perverse. There are many other differences between object relations theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the most obvious difference being the importance of language in Lacanian theory. In her book Psychoanalytic Criticism Elizabeth Wright explains

Chodorow describes as the result of "some major discrepancy" between needs and care is a fundamental constituent of human subjectivity--not the result of a mistake in upbringing. This sense of lack is the result of a necessary symbolic castration, instituted by the father's prohibiting the mother from being the object of the infant's desire, or "phallus." As Lacan says of psychoanalysis, ". . . it comes as no surprise to note that, whereas the first outcome of its origins was a conception of the castration complex based on paternal repression, it has progressively directed its interests towards the frustrations coming from the mother. . . ." (Feminine Sexuality 87). It is also not surprising that we would find images of castration in nostalgic stories where a subject longs to return home to the plenitude that the mother once signified.

A Reading of a Nostalgic Narrative

The idea of home may be romanticized in The Wizard of Oz, where the return to a maternal presence is possible, but in other contemporary treatments of nostalgia, tainted by modern and postmodern cynicism, the return is not so idealized. There are, of course, several important representations of homecomings in twentieth century literature. Leopold Bloom returns to Molly in Joyce's

that unlike Lacanian theory object relations theory does not consider the importance of language in the development of human subjectivity (107).

Ulysses; George Webber learns that "you can't go home again" in Thomas Wolfe's novel by that name, yet the novel ends with a vision of George leading America "back home" to the ideals it once possessed. Contemporary treatments of homecomings seem more bitter not only about the impossibility of returning home but also about the emotional hazards of attempting to return. In Harold Pinter's The Homecoming, a son returns from America with his wife to his family in England only to have them claim his wife as their prostitute, and in Sam Shepard's Buried Child a son returns with his girlfriend to his family who do not recognize him.¹²

¹² I consider "the homecoming" as a trope by which nostalgia in a narrative is expressed. The pastoral is another trope which expresses the nostalgia for a rural past, an allusion to the lost Garden of Eden. In The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America, Leo Marx analyzes the use of the pastoral throughout American literature, and identifies "the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature,' that is the psychic root of all pastoralism--genuine and spurious. That such desires are not peculiar to Americans goes without saying; but our experience as a nation unquestionably has invested them with peculiar intensity. The soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness" (6). In The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters, Annette Kolodny, like Leo Marx, points out that the European tradition became more that just a literary fantasy with the discovery of America, the New Eden. Kolodny, however, considers the implications and consequences of the fact that the landscape of the New Eden was treated linguistically and psychically as a woman. She says that "the move to America was expressed as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal

In Terry Gilliam's film Brazil, nostalgia is represented explicitly as a longing to return to some fulfilling maternal presence, painfully realized in the end to be impossible, a realization which is imaged as a figurative castration. Released in 1984, Brazil is a postmodern pastiche of our culture's favorite preoccupations with Oedipal desire, power and authority, masculinity. It may seem odd to use a dystopian film to talk about nostalgia, considering that, by definition, dystopian films, such as 1984 and the Mad Max series, are about the future. But such nightmarish visions of the future inevitably and nostalgically endorse the present, by representing the present as a preferable past to a catastrophic future. For instance, the television mini-series Amerika, which envisioned the United States after a Russian invasion, inevitably endorsed the Reagan-era present, which seemed delightful by comparison. Here we see most obviously the ideological implications of the nostalgic myth.

Fredric Jameson, however, argues that catastrophic visions of the near future have lost their effect because they seem too familiar and "no longer strike us with the horror of otherness or radical difference" ("Nostalgia for the Present" 525). Perhaps this is why Brazil plays with the conventions of the dystopian film, in typically

warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (6).

postmodern fashion, mixing futuristic yet decrepit technology with the horror of present-day terrorism and the fashion of the forties. Brazil, then, steps out of the trap that is set for typical dystopian films--the trap of endorsing the present--by representing a pastiche of past, present, and future. The central preoccupation in Brazil is not necessarily with a moment in cultural history but with the protagonist's desire to recuperate an imagined moment in his own history. We enter and exit the film through Sam Lowry's dreams.

Sam Lowry's longing in Brazil is to "return home" to his mother's body. His quest is, first, to admit that he desires, and then to figure out what the object of his desire is. Early in the film when his mother, exasperated that he won't accept the promotion that she has arranged for him, asks him what he wants, Sam says, "I don't want anything," which later in the film becomes, "I don't know what I want." Most obviously Sam desires the woman that he pursues in his dreams, the woman who, in his waking life, he mistakenly believes is Jill Layton. The real Jill is a rough, gutsy woman who (unlike Sam himself) fearlessly defies the rules of the monstrous, totalitarian bureaucracy. She is, in other words, the antithesis of the parodically feminine image that Sam Lowry conjures in his dreams. In fact, Sam imaginatively attempts to remake Jill in the image of his "dream girl": as he stares at a photo of the real

Jill Layton--the one without makeup, the one whose hair is cropped short--he absentmindedly sketches in long hair to make her resemble the woman in his dreams.

Sam at least imaginatively succeeds in transmuting Jill's identity when he stealthily erases her file from the Information Retrieval computer. He returns to his mother's apartment where Jill has been hiding and he tells her that he has eradicated her identity: "You don't exist anymore," he says. "I've killed you. Jill Layton is dead." And, in fact, the real Jill Layton, the one that we knew earlier in the film, is in a sense dead, for now she has assumed a new identity along with a new appearance: standing across from Sam, on the other side of his mother's bed, Jill now wears his mother's wig and his mother's nightgown. Sam's real desire, his nostalgia for his mother's body, his "return home," is consummated in his mother's bed.

The conflation in Sam's mind of these two identities, lover and mother, is complete when Jill metamorphoses into his mother. This moment is brilliantly executed when Sam, in his final dream, approaches a woman who appears (to Sam and to us) to be his mother--she's wearing the unmistakable boot for a hat. But when she turns around, we see Jill's body and face but his mother's voice, hair, dress. At the end of this vision, Sam and Jill (now his mother/lover) return to a cozy little home nestled in the ruins of the wasteland. But while Dorothy's return to Auntie Em in her

Kansas home is real, Sam's return home is just an illusion. (That is, Dorothy wakes from her dream of Oz into romanticized "reality," while Sam wakes from his romanticized dream into nightmarish reality.) In reality, Jill is killed because of Sam's mistakes as he inadvertently leads the police to his mother's flat. When the police storm the bedroom, they execute Jill (we hear a shot) and arrest Sam, who is eventually tortured into idiocy. Sam's remaking of Jill Layton suggests that, carried to the extreme, the nostalgic impulse necessarily involves violence toward, or even the destruction of, the idealized object of desire, often some maternal figure or metaphor for the mother's body.¹³ According to the film, nostalgic desire destroys the object of desire as well as castrates the nostalgic. At one point, Sam's friend Jack, the torturer at Information Retrieval, gives Sam a more attractive suit to wear. The torturer's young daughter, who is quietly playing with her dolls, looks at Sam and says, "Put it on, big boy. I want to cut your willy." The scene connects the girl's threat of castration with her father's torture of Sam at the end of the film, which we read as the final castration.

¹³ In his psycho-marxist reading of Brazil, Fred Glass argues that the ending of the film suggests that political change is possible only if one steers "clear of the everpresent temptation to fantasize one's way toward a solution" (25).

Part of the horror of this dystopian vision of the future is the blurring of gender distinctions which consequently emasculates the men in film. Jill Layton is more of a "man" in the conventional sense than the male authority figures in the film. Sam's immediate boss, Mr. Kurtzmann, a "short man," is completely dependent on Sam, perhaps even enamored by him. When Kurtzmann asks Sam to sign some papers, he wags his right hand whining, "My wrist is all limp." Even the main patriarch in the film, the Deputy Minister, is an image of masculine impotence. Confined to a wheelchair, Mr. Helpmann must ask Sam during a party to help him urinate by standing him in front of a urinal. Archibald Tuttle, the renegade repairman, represents the only "real man" in the film, fixing Sam's air conditioner, then disappearing into the night. Although Tuttle appears to be a mythic hero, rescuing Sam in his final dream from the Information Retrieval's torture chamber, Tuttle is finally ineffective against the system.

We might expect that the men are emasculated by the powerful, oppressive totalitarian system, as is the case in George Orwell's 1984. Remarkably, the patriarchy depicted in Brazil, like the Wizard of Oz, is ultimately impotent, an impotence symbolized by the phallic ducts which snake through every scene in the film as if to suggest that the patriarchy is choking itself with its own phallic posturing. The system flexes its muscle with exaggerated and bumbling

shows of force, such as when the police invade the Buttles' home, interrupting their quiet Christmas evening together, to arrest the wrong man, or when the doormen at a party rough up Sam, slamming him against a wall and shoving guns in his face.

Insofar as ineffectual patriarchs and heroes are surrogates for Sam's absent father, then the issue of Sam's manhood is entwined with the issue of paternity. As in The Wizard of Oz, another tale of absent and impotent fathers, the film is rife with images of impotence which signify the castrating realization that the return to origins, to the mother's body, is impossible. In their book Nostalgia and Sexual Difference, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges claim that feminism is the target of male narratives that depict the horrors of gender confusion brought on by the women's movement. Drawing on Roland Barthes' definition of storytelling as the Oedipal search for origins, they interpret John Irving's The World According to Garp as a "meditation on the death of the father" and the rise of women, "particularly the rise of the mother to power." Like Irving's Garp, Gilliam's Brazil laments the death of the father and the rise of the mother who is empowered by Sam Lowry's own nostalgic longing. In fact, Lowry's quest leads

him simultaneously to a paralyzing maternal presence and emasculating paternal absence.¹⁴

Nostalgia and Gender

Although their discussion of the relationship between nostalgia and the quest for paternal origins illuminates our understanding of the nostalgic narrative in general, Doane and Hodges, like Susan Stewart, are more concerned with a socio-political critique of nostalgia than with a psychoanalytic understanding of the desire. In fact, although they briefly mention desire, Doane and Hodges are more interested in the linguistic than in the psychic origin and function of nostalgia. Employing a Derridean critique of nostalgia, they contend that nostalgia is a "rhetorical strategy" which depends on a hierarchy of oppositions, present to past, present to future. They introduce the issue of gender, which Susan Stewart ignores for the most part, by arguing that nostalgic male fiction and nonfiction writers long for a moment before the women's movement challenged the patriarchal assumption that sexual difference

¹⁴ Brazil, like The Wizard of Oz, is a restaging of Odysseus's dramatic journey. In his critical introduction to The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text, Robert Con Davis argues that the Odyssey is a "staging of the Lacanian scene" in which the absent father [Odysseus for Telemachus and Zeus for Odysseus] generates desire which generates the narrative. Davis asserts that "In terms of the narrative theory we are evolving, the [castration] wish is precisely the evocation of lack in narration, and the law is the principle by which lack is articulated" (10). We can see the same relationship between desire, castration, and narrative in both The Wizard of Oz and Brazil.

was "natural" and "fixed" (7). Doane and Hodges point out that "nostalgic writers locate [a woman's] place in a past in which women 'naturally' function in the home to provide a haven of stability that is linguistic as well as psychic: nostos, the return home" (14).

They demonstrate in the rest of their study how nostalgic male writers are urging women back into the home, arguing that several sixties and seventies male novelists use the figure of the Amazon in order to provoke nostalgia for a time when sexual difference was fixed, and that nonfiction polemics against feminism, such as Brigitte and Peter Berger's sociology of the family, The War Over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground, attack feminism for undermining the nuclear family.¹⁵

Unlike Doane and Hodges, I am less interested in the way that nostalgia is used as a political tool by male writers (or female writers, for that matter). I am more concerned with the psychic realities and the aesthetic representations of nostalgia in women's writing, particularly the way that nostalgia, the longing for reunion, is subverted by an antithetical longing for loss, which I will discuss in later chapters. I would prefer to

¹⁵ Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) could be considered, at least in part, another nostalgic polemic against feminism. Had the book been published earlier, Doane and Hodges would have probably included it in their discussion.

ask whether the aesthetic representations of nostalgic desire (i.e., Odysseus' longing to return to Ithaka, Dorothy's longing to return to Kansas, Sam Lowry's longing to return to his mother's body) are stories of universal human experience and desire. If men are more nostalgic than women, which Chodorowian object relations suggests, then the nostalgic stories that our culture tells may simply be masculine treatments of the desire, another instance of the masculine masquerading as the universal.

In "Castration or Decapitation?" Hélène Cixous claims that man "cannot live without resigning himself to loss. He has to mourn. It's his way of withstanding castration" (54). According to Cixous, the threat of castration establishes an economy of desire that differs for men and women. Because men live under the threat of castration they mourn "in order to recover the investment made in the lost object" (54). Woman, on the other hand, "does not mourn, does not resign herself to loss. She basically takes up the challenge of loss in order to go on living: she lives it, gives it life, is capable of unsparing loss. She does not hold onto loss, she loses without holding on to loss" (54). Since the nostalgic story is a narrative that explains an individual's loss, then men, who mourn under the threat of castration, generate a nostalgic story different from the story generated by women. Certainly we may find nostalgic stories written by women, but we might not expect to find in

women's nostalgic narratives the anxiety of castration which seems to characterize male narratives of nostalgic longing.

Jamaica Kincaid, for one, writes fantastic narratives which are propelled by nearly overwhelming nostalgic desire, stories which are steeped in a longing for a return home to a mother's presence. Her short story "In the Night" records the dreamy musings of a little girl before she falls asleep and closes with the girl's lyrical prophecy of her own future. She says,

Now I am a girl, but one day I will marry a woman--a red-skin woman with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes, who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them. I would like to marry this woman and live with her in a mud hut near the sea. . . . Every night I would sing this woman a song; the words I don't know yet, but the tune is in my head. This woman I would like to marry knows many things, but to me she will only tell about things that would never dream of making me cry; and every night, over and over, she will tell me something that begins, "Before you were born." I will marry a woman like this, and every night, every night, I will be completely happy.

(At the Bottom of the River 11-12)

The speaker's desire in this passage is simultaneously prophetic and nostalgic. Longing for a (re)union with a maternal woman, the girl desires the restoration, in the future, of a moment in the past--a moment of happy fusion with her mother--that could only have been an illusion.

I have argued that nostalgia exists in the realm of demand, articulated desire; and I have defined nostalgia as the way a human subject mythologizes lack. Thus, it is not

surprising that the girl's nostalgic desire in this passage intersects with narrative. The girl says that she will sing to the woman she marries, although she does not yet know the words. And more importantly, she imagines that the woman she marries will tell her stories that begin with the quintessentially nostalgic opening: "Before you were born."

The nostalgia that Jamaica Kincaid represents at the end of her short story is the homoerotic desire of a woman for another woman. A woman's nostalgic desire, I would suggest, may ultimately be a homoerotic desire. Carol Christ describes a "longing for the mother" in Adrienne Rich's explicitly lesbian love poetry as a "homesickness," which I would call nostalgia.¹⁶ Lacan has said that the lesbian relation is the only sexual relation that is not perverse--that is, père vers, toward the father. Lesbian desire, like nostalgic desire, is on the side of the mother, but lacks the anxiety of castration that male nostalgic desire involves, at least insofar as that anxiety is manifested on an imaginary level in narrative. Although it is the most obvious and, ironically, rarest expression of woman's nostalgic desire, the lesbian relation is only one

¹⁶ I am not saying that a woman's nostalgia may necessarily be consummated sexually with another woman, nor am I claiming that all lesbian love is nostalgic. I am arguing, however, that an expression of woman's nostalgic desire may be lesbian.

of several ways a feminine subject may position herself in relation to loss.

Doane and Hodges conclude their study of nostalgia and sexual difference with a utopian gesture toward a radically feminist disruption of the nostalgic story: "By embracing the subversive possibilities of language, feminist theorists can undermine nostalgic rhetoric, leaving cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity in play, rather than in place" (142). Since they do not specify how feminist theory can undermine nostalgic rhetoric, I am tempted here to take up the issue where they conclude, celebrating lesbian desire as both imitative and subversive of masculine nostalgic desire. However, I recognize the traps, particularly the risk of essentialism, that such an argument entails. As Teresa de Lauretis warns in Technologies of Gender, feminists tend to inscribe their argument of sexual difference within an ancient frame of oppositions--woman becomes merely difference from man. With the precision of a mathematical proof, de Lauretis argues that "the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation" (5). Applying her conclusion to the issue of nostalgia, I would argue that representations of nostalgic desire--by men or women--construct gender as much as they are constructed by it. In other words, the nostalgic narrative becomes one of the "technologies" by which gender is constructed.

We return, then, to the issue in feminist theory described in Chapter One: how can feminist theory "speak" about gender, sexuality, and subjectivity within the conceptual and textual frame determined by male desire but presented as universal desire? De Lauretis describes the problem perplexing feminist theorists:

The problem, which is a problem for all feminist scholars and teachers, is one we face almost daily in our work, namely, that most of the available theories of reading, writing, sexuality, ideology, or any other cultural production are built on male narratives of gender, whether oedipal or anti-oedipal, bound by the heterosexual contract; narratives which persistently tend to re-produce themselves in feminist theories. They tend to, and will do so unless one constantly resists, suspicious of their drift. Which is why the critique of all discourses concerning gender, including those produced or promoted as feminist, continues to be as vital a part of feminism as is the ongoing effort to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective--a view from "elsewhere." (The Technology of Gender 25)

I would include the nostalgic story, with its embedded Oedipal logic, its quest for origin and its images of castration, as one of our culture's "male narratives of gender." Such a narrative is inevitably alienating for the female reader or listener who is caught between identifying with the male nostalgic and identifying with the female object of his desire. I believe we can locate that identificatory split with respect to the nostalgic story in the narratives of some contemporary women writers. More than any other contemporary writer, Marilynne Robinson has

dedicated her writing, both fiction and nonfiction, to critiquing that nostalgic story. Robinson's novel Housekeeping, I will argue, is an attempt to rewrite the cultural narrative of nostalgia and "to define the terms from another perspective--a view from 'elsewhere.'"

CHAPTER THREE
NOSTALGIA AND MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S DISCONTENT

For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by this indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past.

--Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams

So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory.

--Marilynne Robinson, Housekeeping

"I am profoundly discontent with the present state of our civilization," says Marilynne Robinson in a recent essay ("Sigmund Freud" 248). Robinson's complaint is with intellectuals, contemporary writers and educators who romanticize the past in such a way that they fail to see the grim realities of the present. Robinson, herself an intellectual, writer, and part-time educator, contends that under the spell of nostalgia, American intellectuals idealize their European forebears, uncritically consuming their ideas, therefore refusing to recognize their faults or to hold them responsible. Marilynne Robinson's discontent with civilization has a distressingly real referent: the British government's massive dumping of plutonium into the Irish and North Seas. Since Americans have nostalgically

romanticized their "mother country," she argues, they have failed to hold Britain accountable for its atrocious transgression against the world's environment. Robinson concludes her essay "Culture and Spirit" with a bitter, apocalyptic prognosis for civilization: "The sea cannot bear the burden that has been thrust on it, which spreads farther with every current and is carried ashore by every wind. . . . Time might put it right, but we ended time, or we let the British do it, while we were busy with our little righteousness, our little scorn" (102).

In this chapter, I would like first to consider Marilynne Robinson's discontent with civilization, specifically her critique of "the nostalgic fallacy," which she has pursued most directly in recent essays. In light of the concerns that she sets forth in these essays, Housekeeping may be considered an aesthetic representation of the critique of the nostalgic fallacy and an attempt to rewrite the cultural narrative of nostalgia. Finally, I will analyze some of the political uses and implications of Robinson's critique of nostalgia, especially considering her crusade to stop the plutonium dumping in Britain.

The Nostalgic Fallacy

Marilynne Robinson published Housekeeping, her first and only novel so far, nearly a decade ago. Housekeeping has been acclaimed by reviewers and scholars who have tried to describe its extraordinary quality and explain the

implications of its message.¹ Although her novel met with much praise and study, in her most recent writing Robinson has turned from fiction to the essay in order to warn the world that Britain is killing us. The promotional note for her recently published book Mother Country, an exposé of the plutonium dumping, says that Robinson "has turned from imagery and story to a subject her sense of reality couldn't avoid." Despite this turn from fiction to nonfiction, Robinson's corpus may be read as a piece. The issues that she treats in her novel Housekeeping are tested against the political realities that she contends with in Mother Country. Her work in fiction and nonfiction, I will argue, is ultimately unified around a single pursuit--a debunking of the nostalgic myth.

Robinson launches her most direct and sustained critique of nostalgic rhetoric in her essay "Writers and the

¹ Housekeeping has received significant scholarly attention, particularly from feminist critics who, one way or another, identify the radical implications of the novel. Joan Kirkby claims that the novel "challenges the nature-culture dichotomy characteristic of much American thought" (91). Elizabeth Meese concludes her Derridean reading of the novel by arguing that Robinson "maps a shadowy territory between difference and sameness, preparing us for an existence predicated on hope and defined only by uncertainty" (68). Thomas Foster applies Kristeva's theory of women's time to the novel in order to argue that Housekeeping "shows how an analysis like Kristeva's might organize a narrative of women's resistance to the historical limitations imposed on them" (74). Roberta Rubenstein's object relations reading of the novel focuses on Ruth's initiation into Sylvie's world. Rubenstein argues that Ruth and Sylvie's transiency "can be understood as a capacity to transcend all enclosures that impede the achievement of a relational selfhood in terms not restrictively dependent on gender" (227).

Nostalgic Fallacy." In this essay, Robinson responds to a criticism made by writers Robert Dunn and E. L. Doctorow that American writers lack "a sense of history" and fail to achieve "political seriousness."² Robinson argues that the problem is not that contemporary writers lack a sense of history or politics but that they fallaciously confuse history with an old myth, and dress that myth in political rhetoric. There is a difference between clinging to an artificial idea of the past and having a sense of history, Robinson notes:

while we have no sense of history, we are enchanted by a myth of history, a truly venerable fable, which goes like this: Once the world was as it ought to be, then came the Catastrophe, after which we have toiled in twilight, lost and downcast. No one knows how old that story is, but it has never been more passionately believed than it is now. (1)

As cultural storytellers, Robinson argues, we seem preoccupied with positing a Golden Age in our past in which all was good and innocent, a moment before our knowledge of pain and suffering, before the Catastrophe, which "can be situated between any present moment and any other whose imputed qualities mark it as prelapsarian" (1). For

² Although she ostensibly focuses on contemporary writers in this essay, Robinson treats them as verbal representatives of our whole culture, so that she is ultimately concerned with the nostalgia of a culture, not particular writers. In extrapolating from contemporary writers to the entire culture, Robinson relies on first person-plural pronouns, as she does throughout her non-fiction. Unfortunately, the use of "we," "our," "us" tends to alienate rather than include the reader and lends her non-fiction prose an off-putting, even pious, tone.

instance, Robinson says, it is common to consider the fifties as a Golden Age before the turmoil of the sixties. But for those who are fond of remembering the fifties as a time of innocence, Robinson points out that "We 50's children were sold little identification tags of heat-resistant metal, presumably to be sifted from the ashes of our grade school, whose windows, in the event of atomic attack, would fly into shards and slash us to death if we forgot to crouch under our desks" (34). Considering the palpable sense of fear that the age provoked in Americans, Robinson says, the idea that the 50's were a time of innocence "is nonsense--another version, now that the decade be viewed from a safe distance, of the myth of the Fall" (34). The myth of the Fall, then, is another trope, like the pastoral or the homecoming, which figures nostalgic desire in cultural narratives.

This pervasive myth of the Fall structures our understanding of history in such a way that the stories we tell about the past tend to follow this ancient plot. The myth even structures our understanding of literary history. Robinson identifies the nostalgic fallacy in the common definition of modernism:

The idea at the heart of modernism is that once beauty and meaning bloomed in the meadows of experience, heigh-ho: viz., the fine things they said and the pretty things they made. Look where you will, you will find no such dewy meadows in this world. Therefore, everything has somehow changed disastrously. Consciousness is a nuisance, a fright, a disappointment--this is

something new under the sun, the 'modern' condition. A premodern consciousness was, presumably, as sound and shapely as a good pear. This notion is so widely approved it hardly seems to require proof--yet starting at Gilgamesh and reading forward, I find no evidence that consciousness has ever been a comfortable experience. (34)

According to nostalgic view of literary history which Robinson critiques here, everything was fine until thinkers such as Freud, Nietzsche, and Einstein turned our world view upside down, forcing us to jettison all our comfortable beliefs about human nature and the universe.³ Robinson would have us question the way this nostalgic fallacy structures our most common understanding of literary history.

Robinson's contention that we recreate history, literary or otherwise, to suit our needs comes as no news to those who are versed in contemporary theories of history and metahistory. Robinson ultimately speaks as a writer to writers in this essay, "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy," locating the problem, the perpetuation and perdurability of old assumptions such as the nostalgic fallacy, in the tendentiousness of the language of contemporary experience. "I think it is the tired assumptions we try to build on and the cumbered and self-referential language we use that keep us in a narrow space, lamenting," she contends (1).

³ This is, incidentally, a version of literary history that I was taught in sophomore literature surveys, and have, in turn, taught sophomore literature students.

Robinson has devoted her writing to debunking cultural myths that are based on "tired assumptions" and revitalizing our "cumbered and self-referential language." For example, as a regular contributor to the "About Books" column in the New York Times Book Review, Robinson in one of her essays challenged the assumption that the ordinary reader is not patient or intelligent enough to read difficult prose or poetry; and in another essay she called for "the remystification of virtually everything" by reinstituting the power of metaphor, which seems to have been stripped from our everyday language by a scientific urge to explain away mysteries.⁴

Robinson rejects the popular minimalist language which, in its superrealistic urge to represent the minute details of contemporary life, "makes images of banality out of banal language," a gesture that she likens to "robbing the poor" or "beating the mad" (34). (In a review of Raymond Carver's collection of short stories, Robinson compared Carver, considered the father of minimalism, to "the poet William Carlos Williams, who declared there were 'no ideas but in things,' and who turned banality's pockets out and found all

⁴ In her essay "Language is Smarter Than We Are," Robinson writes: "Bad assumptions are never better than no assumptions at all. And I am persuaded that among all the constellated forms of describable relationships in the world, there are mists in which we do not yet see configuration. These should neither be denied nor subsumed in other ways of perceiving" (8). I am arguing that Robinson's corpus is dedicated to exposing "bad assumptions."

their contents beautiful" ["Marriage" 40]). In her own fiction writing, Robinson has tried to find a fresh, poetic language that resists repeating the same, worn assumptions which reinforce old myths, such as the nostalgic myth of the Fall:

To find a new language for a new kind of novel is a thing I have long aspired to do. No luck yet. When I wrote "Housekeeping" some five years ago, I made a world remote enough to allow me to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made. It was a shift forced on me by the intractability of the language of contemporary experience--which must not be confused with contemporary experience itself. Merely speak the word 'suburb,' for example, and an entire world springs to mind, prepared for our understanding by sociologists and cultural commentators and novelists, good and bad. The language of present experience is so charged with judgment and allusion and intonation that it cannot be put to any new use or forced along any unaccustomed path. The story it wants to tell I do not want to tell.
(34)

One of the stories that contemporary language tells, says Robinson, is the myth of the Fall, the nostalgic story. Housekeeping is an attempt to write outside that myth, to force language along another path in order to tell a story that is different from the nostalgic story.

Robinson's search to find a "new language for a new kind of novel" may be considered part of what de Lauretis describes as the ongoing feminist effort "to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives and to define the terms of another perspective--a view from

'elsewhere'" (Technologies 25).⁵ Whether or not Robinson considers herself a feminist writer, in its attempt to rewrite an ancient cultural narrative of loss, Housekeeping has important implications for feminist thinkers, especially those concerned with critiquing traditional discourses concerning gender. In Chapter Two I argued that the nostalgic story, with its quest for origins, its images of castration, and its embedded Oedipal logic, is one of the masculine cultural narratives that has been told and retold since Homer's Odyssey. Robinson's view from elsewhere that she creates in Housekeeping offers an alternative to the nostalgic story of loss. De Lauretis says that "if that view [from elsewhere] is nowhere to be seen, not given in a single text, not recognizable as a representation, it is not that we--feminists, women--have not yet succeeded in producing it. It is, rather, that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as representation" (25). I would like to identify precisely why Robinson's remarkable representation gives us a view from elsewhere, an alternative to the nostalgic story.

Housekeeping and The Critic

In order to create that view from elsewhere by rewriting the nostalgic story in Housekeeping, Robinson had

⁵ That is not to say that Marilynne Robinson is a feminist writer, a label that she implicitly resists when she says, "I cannot be a writer of 'political' fiction," a statement that I will consider in detail later in this chapter (34).

to make "a world remote enough" to allow her "to choose and control the language of which the story was to be made." The story is remote in time and place--we are not sure when exactly it takes place, and it is set in a isolated little town called Fingerbone. (The fact that Fingerbone is in Idaho is a detail revealed only incidentally in the narrator's description of her grandmother's death (165).) More importantly, the action of the story is removed from the facts and details of what we commonly take to be everyday experience. Unlike a minimalist's story, Housekeeping makes no reference to McDonald's or MTV or Bruce Springsteen. Yet the remoteness of the world that Robinson creates in Housekeeping poses a particular challenge, a hazard even, to literary critics who describe that world, and inevitably translate the language of the novel into the very "language of contemporary experience" that the novel resists.

For instance, Elizabeth Meese describes the world in Housekeeping as "a world of women," and she argues that Robinson "defies the nature of fiction" by characterizing "women's experience in its own right, thereby subverting the oppositional view of seeing and understanding women only in relation to men" (58). Meese asserts that "Robinson's construction of a world without men, or more accurately always with men only in the margins, permits her to explore the idea of 'women' and gender roles in essentially female

terms" (59). Having called attention to the absence of men and the presence of women in the novel, Meese herself has reinscribed the world in Housekeeping within the male/female opposition. Meese's reading of Housekeeping enacts what de Lauretis identifies as the tendency "to recontain or recuperate the radical epistemological potential of feminist thought inside the walls of the master's house" (Technologies 2).

In fact, part of the power and strangeness of Housekeeping is that it precludes talk of sexual politics, a favorite topic in the discourse of contemporary experience. The nearest reference to sex in the novel is an abstract and anonymous simile that explains how one's senses are heightened in the dark: "As, for example, one of two, lying still in a dark room, knows when the other is awake" (100). Like the word "suburb," which Robinson says is "prepared for our understanding by sociologists and cultural commentators and novelists, good and bad," the word "sex," it seems, conjures associations and meanings (prepared for our understanding, in this case, by sociologists, psychologists and feminists) that are beyond the novelist's control. While it is true that the world of Housekeeping is populated for the most part by girls and women, that fact makes no difference one way or the other. Having removed the action of the novel from the here and now by eschewing references to popular culture and to sex, Robinson creates a setting

for radically rewriting our culture's favorite story about loss, the nostalgic story.

A View from Elsewhere

Above all, Housekeeping is about loss, not catastrophic loss, having something one moment, then losing it the next, but about the loss at the center of our being. The story, nearly every word, phrase, and sentence, is drenched in loss, just as the town, the orchard, and the house in the story are drenched in the lake, which spills across thresholds, seeps through foundations, and challenges the boundaries that the townspeople construct in order to stave off the inevitable. Furthermore, Housekeeping is about the nostalgic stories that we tell to explain loss. One of those stories, as I have discussed in the last chapter, goes like this: as human subjects, our knowledge of loss comes from the separation from our mother, and we nostalgically long for a reconciliation and return to a moment of bliss, a moment of fusion with our mother, which is only ever an illusion. Ruth, the narrator of Housekeeping, casts this story in terms of another story about the origins of loss, the myth of the Fall:

The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory--there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine. (192)

Ruth's recitation of this nostalgic myth, which structures most of our favorite cultural stories, should not be taken as an endorsement of the myth. The entire action of the novel, I am arguing, subverts the myth, especially through the central metaphor of the novel, the metaphor of housekeeping. This myth of the Fall is most obviously linked to the metaphor of housekeeping, when Ruth describes a house as if it were mother Eve's body, referring to its "roof, spine, and ribs" (my italics, 158). The novel implies that we keep house as if we believed we could reconstruct mother Eve's body and regain Eden in some small way. As keepers of houses, we draw a boundary about us to keep the good inside and the bad outside, and we ironically fight the accumulation of dust, forgetting that having come from dust we will return to dust, as the story goes. Using the metaphor of housekeeping in order to critique the nostalgic story, Robinson exposes the fallacy of housekeeping by representing the futility of drawing boundaries around us to stave off the inevitable.

Most of the characters in the novel, like most of the novel's readers, keep house because they believe that structural boundaries will keep the lake, and everything else that threatens, outside. The first two chapters describe the conventional housekeeping of the grandmother and the elderly aunts, who believe in keeping house. The narrator's grandmother says, "'Sell the orchards. . . . But

keep the house. So long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be,' . . . 'God willing.'" Lily and Nona, who take care of Ruth and Lucille when their grandmother dies, rarely leave the house but fear that at any moment the roof might fall (33). The narrator's sister Lucille, like her grandmother, keeps house, eventually leaving her sister and aunt to live with her Home Economics teacher, appropriately enough. When Lucille and Ruthie spend an unplanned night in the woods, Lucille feels uncomfortable and unnatural in the rough "house" that they construct with driftwood and fir limbs. Ruthie, the narrator, tells us that Lucille "sang 'Mockingbird Hill,' and then she sat down beside me in our ruined stronghold, never still, never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun" (115).

Most feminist readings of Housekeeping, intent on equating structure with patriarchy, forget that the house belongs, not to the grandfather, but to the grandmother. Joan Kirkby, for instance, says that "The rejection of the grandfather's house is a rejection of the patriarchal notion of housebuilding and housekeeping as conceived in American literature" (106). Yet the grandfather grew up in a house which was dug out of the ground, a structure coextensive with nature. Having grown up in a house that was "no more a human stronghold than a grave," the grandfather was particularly unsuited to building houses, and so when his

wife asks him to build a house for them, he builds an awkward house: "If its fenestration was random, if its corners were out of square, my grandfather had built it himself, knowing nothing whatever of carpentry" (74). A railroad worker who is ill-suited to keeping house, the grandfather, not grandmother, passes on the habit of transience, his impatience and discomfort with cultural and familial structures, to his daughters: Molly becomes a missionary, Sylvie a transient, and Helen takes flight when she drives her borrowed car into the lake.

Housekeeping suggests that we build houses out of a nostalgic longing to reconstruct a moment and a place before our catastrophic fall into a world of loss, but the walls that we build around us nevertheless remain permeable to insistent natural change, such as the flood of lake water. The novel likens the permeability of the boundaries we draw around us to protect us from loss to the tentativeness of human bonds, particularly the fragility of the bond between mother and child. The novel gently reminds us, in a voice so soothing that it almost distracts us from the significance of the message, that whether we are child or mother our human fate is to be abandoned. That is, we experience the inevitable separation as abandonment. As children, Ruthie and her sister Lucille are passed from their mother to their grandmother to their great aunts and finally into the care of their transient aunt, Sylvie.

"Then there is the matter of my mother's abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and forget us, they are so lost in thoughts of their own, and soon or late they disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise" (215). According to the nostalgic story, we are forever running after "mother," whatever form she takes, longing for reunion and return.

The novel asks, what happens to the nostalgia of a subject who willfully wanders without hope of return? In critiquing the nostalgic fallacy as it relates to human subjectivity and desire, Housekeeping suggests that it may be possible to posit a different relation to lack and to tell a different story about loss from what we are accustomed. The narrator's transient aunt Sylvie does not wait, as most of us do, for the world to be made whole again or try to make it whole by housekeeping. She has submitted to the fact of separation and loss, wandering without destination or hope of reunion. "I like to travel by train," Sylvie said. 'Especially in the passenger cars. I'll take you with me sometime.' 'Take us where?' Lucille asked. Sylvie shrugged. 'Somewhere. Wherever'" (50). And when she reluctantly must keep house, she opens the windows and doors, allowing leaves and water to seep in; she calmly moves through the house in the dark as the nighttime comes on; she wears torn gloves and

buttonless dresses. Sylvie keeps house as if she realizes that it is impossible to stave off change in nature and the decay of human things. In fact, she even seems quietly comforted by the fact of loss. Ruth says, "Sylvie, I knew, felt the life of perished things" (124).

At one moment in the novel, Ruth and Lucille, truant from school, happen to see Sylvie walking out over the lake along the railroad bridge. Then she stops, "her fisted hands pushed against the bottoms of her pockets," and peers "over the side of the bridge where the water slapped at the pilings" (81). Having already claimed Ruth and Lucille's grandfather, who died when his train jumped the track and slid into the deep lake, and their mother, who drove her car off a cliff into the lake, the lake in the novel signifies loss. Ruth says, "One cannot cup one's hand and drink from the rim of any lake without remembering that mothers have drowned in it . . . (193). Yet Sylvie stares calmly into the lake, just as calmly as she lives with lack. In this case, it is not coincidental that "lake" and "lack" sound alike, and in Middle English were both spelled lac.

Nostalgic desire, which I have defined as a way a subject mythologizes lack, depends on the temporal notion of past, present, and future. Whatever moment was imagined to have been experienced in the past is now hoped to be reconstituted in the future. Remarkably, Sylvie seems to exist outside linear time. Sylvie, in a sense, is literally

indifferent: she occupies a space outside the oppositions of past/present or present/future, oppositions which structure nostalgic desire. Ruth says that Sylvie "inhabited a millennial present" (94).⁶ In this article "History, Critical Theory and Women's Social Practices: 'Women's Time' and Housekeeping," Thomas Foster explains that Sylvie "exists in a process of becoming, as a transient" and therefore transcends the limits of history. As a metaphor in the novel, transiency represents the possibility of occupying a space outside time--past, present and future--which necessarily precludes nostalgic longing for the past, as well as for "home."

In order to see how extraordinarily different Sylvie is, we might briefly compare her to a male "bum" in contemporary fiction who nostalgically longs to return home. William Kennedy tells the same nostalgic story in Ironweed that Homer tells in the Odyssey: a man leaves home, suffers extraordinary perils while he longs to return home to a maternal presence. Kennedy's Ironweed, in fact, may be considered another enactment of the very myth of the Fall that Robinson's Housekeeping critiques, and Ruth's

⁶ Ruth says that, unlike Sylvie, who lives entirely in the present, Lucille "was of the common persuasion. Time that had not come yet--an anomaly in itself--had the fiercest reality for her. It was a hard wind in her face; if she had made the world every tree would be bent, every stone weathered, every bough stripped by that steady and contrary wind. Lucille saw in everything its potential for invidious change" (93).

meditation on the myth might just as easily be taken as a synopsis of the plot of Ironweed. Ruth says that "the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return" (192). Francis Phelan's "expulsion" comes when he flees from home out of guilt and fear after accidentally dropping and killing his infant son. Francis has been on the streets running out of a cowardly inability to return home, yet always nostalgically hopes for "reconciliation and return."

Whereas Sylvie lives comfortably with the inevitability of death, Francis fights it off. He tells his friend Rudy, "'I believe we die when we can't stand it anymore. I believe we stand as much as we can and then we die when we can'" (65). At the end of Ironweed Francis is riding a freight train but dreams of returning home to Annie, the wife he left years ago, and who, like Penelope, still waits for him to return. In the final moments of the novel, Francis imagines a heavenly reunion and reconciliation:

If they weren't on to him, then he'd mention it to Annie someday (she already had the thought, he could tell that) about setting up the cot down in Danny's room, when things got to be absolutely right, and straight.

That room of Danny's had some space to it. And it got the morning light too.

It was a mighty nice little room. (227)

In this quintessentially nostalgic conclusion, Francis imagines that he will return to his grandson Danny's room to live, like Danny, under the maternal care of his wife Annie,

the ever giving and forgiving mother. Francis's fantasy might be phrased in terms of the nostalgic myth of the Fall: "There will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine" (Housekeeping 192). Unlike Francis, Sylvie does not long for return and reunion. As such, Sylvie embodies a position outside the nostalgic narrative of desire, giving us a view from elsewhere. Considering how we have clung to this narrative of desire, it is no wonder that this glimpse of elsewhere may seem disturbing.

Sylvie as Uncanny

I have noticed that when I teach Housekeeping students often perceive Sylvie as sinister and characterize her as "weird." They are shocked that she allows the children to be truant from school; they are perplexed that she collects tin cans and newspapers, stacking them to the ceiling in the parlor; they are annoyed that she prefers darkness to light, solitude to community; they are spooked when she wanders in the night through the house and orchard. Like Lucille who is of "the common persuasion," these readers are disturbed and frightened by Sylvie's behavior, most likely because she challenges their most cherished assumptions.⁷ If the

⁷ Interestingly, in the film version of Housekeeping Sylvie is more giddy than strangely quiet; her habits are comical rather than disturbing. Sylvie's character in the film is more appealing to the conventional tastes of viewers of "the common persuasion."

characterization of Sylvie touches a nerve, it is because it gives us a spectacular view from elsewhere. Sylvie's disturbing otherness is the effect of that view.

I would argue that Sylvie arouses in such readers what Freud has theorized as the uncanny, the sense that something is frighteningly unfamiliar. A linguistic explanation of Freud's theory of the uncanny may inform our understanding of nostalgia, the longing to return home. Although the German "unheimlich" is translated as "uncanny" in English, the word literally translates as "unhomely." Unheimlich is the opposite of heimlich, which means "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar," and in another usage of the word, it means "arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (Freud, Standard Edition 17: 222). Thus, in preferring not to keep house, Sylvie, who does not long to return home, embodies the uncanny, or unhomely, a fact most dramatically symbolized when she and Ruthie burn down their house and leave Fingerbone for a nomadic life.

Yet the remote world that Robinson creates in Housekeeping--its seemingly pervasive darkness, its isolated, often incommunicative, characters--contributes as much as Sylvie's "unhomely" behavior to the feeling of uncanniness that the novel arouses. Freud puzzles over the uncanny effect of silence, solitude, and darkness, asking, "And once more: what is the origin of the uncanny effect of

silence, darkness and solitude? Do these factors point to the part played by danger and in the genesis of what is uncanny, notwithstanding that in children these same factors are the most frequent determinants of the expression of fear . . . ?" (17: 247). The uncanny effect that Housekeeping has on some people might be explained in part by the fact that the novel presents "silence, darkness and solitude," which usually inspire apprehension or fear, as the ordinary state of things, and anything else (i.e., noise, light, community) as artificial and contrived. Sylvie prefers that she, Ruth, and Lucille eat supper in the dark, which makes them more aware of nature, the sounds of "the crickets and the nighthawks," and which hones their senses so that, as Ruth says, "we would feel our proximity with our finer senses" (100). When Lucille suddenly turns on the kitchen light while they are eating supper in the moonlight, the artificial light seems a rude and unnatural disruption:

The window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone before as this world from the primal darkness. We saw that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes, and we drank from jelly glasses. . . . Lucille had startled us all, flooding the room so suddenly with light, exposing heaps of pots and dishes, the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged and were propped against the boxes of china. . . .

In the light we were startled and uncomfortable. Lucille yanked the chain again, so hard that the little bell at the end of it struck the ceiling and then we sat uncomfortably in an exaggerated darkness. (100-101)

This scene exemplifies what the novel as a whole achieves, transposing the ordinary (here, a lighted kitchen) into the extraordinary, making the familiar strange, the canny uncanny. The lighted kitchen is as remote from the dark kitchen "as this world from primal darkness," just as the silent, dark, solitudinous world that Robinson creates in Housekeeping is remote from any we might know.

Ruth's initiation into Sylvie's world involves her accepting the uncanny elements of silence, solitude, and darkness as natural and ordinary. As Ruth gradually becomes more like Sylvie, she becomes less afraid and more accustomed to silence, darkness, and solitude.⁸ "Darkness is the only solvent," Ruth discovers when she and Lucille spend a night in the woods (116). And later, in the woods with Sylvie, she says, "Loneliness is an absolute discovery" (157). One night during the flood, Sylvie stands silently alone in the dark, which annoys and frightens Lucille and Ruth, who look for her:

When we did not move or speak, there was no proof that we were there at all. The wind and the water brought sounds intact from any imaginable distance. Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer. (70).

⁸ Roberta Rubenstein analyzes Ruth's initiation into Sylvie's world in her book Boundaries of the Self.

This passage suggests that silence, darkness, and solitude are frightening because they threaten our certainty of our own existence and identity, reducing us to "an intuition." Alone in the dark, we cannot perceive the gaze or hear the voice of another which assures us that we exist. In trying to understand the uncanny effect of silence, solitude, darkness, Freud rather weakly concludes that "we can only say that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free" (17: 252). The challenge, according to the novel, is to become comfortable with these "factors" of silence, solitude, and darkness, instead of fighting them off like demons.

According to Freud, people experience the strongest sense of the uncanny in relation to death and dying, which explains why ghosts are so frightening. Freud says,

Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. As we have seen some languages in use to-day can only render the German expression 'an unheimlich house' by 'a haunted house.' (17: 241)

Robinson uses ghost imagery throughout the novel both as a metaphor for transiency--Ruth and Sylvie become like ghosts, floating from town to town--and as a metaphor for the memory trace--Ruth and Sylvie become ghosts in Lucille's memory. (The ghosts that throng the novel Ironweed, by contrast, represent haunting projections of Francis's guilt.)

Perhaps the most striking effect of the uncanny in the novel is this sense that Sylvie and Ruthie are somehow ghosts. Sylvie seems to haunt her mother's house, moving about silently in the dark like a ghost. Lucille and Ruthie think that they hear her moving through the house and orchard at night, but the sounds weave themselves into the fabric of their dreams (83). When Ruth and Sylvie row home after their day in the woods, Ruth wonders what it would feel like if they both died in the lake where her grandfather had drowned in the mythic train wreck. She imagines, "He might see us and think he was dreaming again of flushed but weightless spirits in a painted sky, buoyant in an impalpable element" (150). Ironically, this passage conjures Sylvie and Ruth as ghosts in the grandfather's imagination, while, in fact, he is a ghost in theirs.

Later in the novel, Ruth alludes to "this feeling of ghostliness" that overwhelms her when she is in public, making her feel "incompletely and minimally existent, in fact" (105). She says, "It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares," and she wonders if Sylvie, too, "felt ghostly, as I imagined she must" (106). Ruth's feeling of ghostliness, making no impact on the world while watching it, is the perspective of a transient. And Ruth tells us, from the point of view of Fingerbone's residents, that "the transients wandered through Fingerbone like ghosts,

terrifying as ghosts are because they were not very different from us" (178).

Finally, after fleeing Fingerbone and after years of drifting, Ruth imagines that she and Sylvie, who are presumed to be dead, haunt Lucille's memory like ghosts returned from the dead:

Sylvie and I have stood outside the window a thousand times, and we have thrown the side door open when she was upstairs changing beds, and we have brought in leaves, and flung the curtains and tipped the bud vase, and somehow left the house again before she could run downstairs, leaving behind us a strong smell of lake water. She would sigh and think, 'They never change.' (218)

This ending of the novel has stirred a critical debate over whether Sylvie and Ruth are in fact dead. Thomas Foster summarizes the argument:

Kirkby points to the unsettling refusal here to distinguish whether the pair are metaphorically dead to the social world that refused to tolerate Sylvie's prefigurative practices or whether they have actually died. In the latter case the entire narrative would take the form of a proleptic anticipation of the narrator's death, described in the past tense. . . . This undecidability that holds together two apparently mutually exclusive possibilities underscores what Meese calls the 'double gesture,' the 'negation of certainty and the affirmation of possibility' that ends the novel, as Ruth imagines Lucille sitting in a restaurant where no one could know 'how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie' (96-97).

I think that the ending of the novel is less ambiguous and supernatural than it seems. First, as transients Ruth and Lucille are like ghosts--unseen viewers of the world. More importantly, they are ghosts in Lucille's memory. Here the

ghost becomes a metaphor for what anyone is in another's memory, a trace that is subject to narrative. Ruth explains how her mother lingers as a "specter" in her memory: "The nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away, the curve of the back and the swing of the coat familiar as to imply that they should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable" (116). Her mother's fleeting ghost haunts Ruth's memory, as she recreates the details in order to show how memory is altered, manipulated through narrative:

Say that my mother was as tall as a man, and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders, so that I could splash my hands in the cold leaves above our heads. Say that my grandmother sang in her throat while she sat on her bed and we laced up her big black shoes. Such details are merely accidental. Who could know but us? And since their thoughts were bent upon other ghosts than ours, other darkneses than we had seen, why must we be left, the survivors picking among flotsam, among the small, unnoticed, unvalued clutter that was all that remained when they vanished, that only catastrophe made notable? (116)

Toward the end of the novel Ruth says that she remembers her mother, "grave with the peace of the destined, the summoned, and she seems almost an apparition" (197). Elizabeth Meese explains that "through narrative alone the dead are restored, resurrected from their reliquaries--lake, house, memory. . . . Only through the narrative record of memory are the dead at once dead and alive" (65). Loss, or

absence, haunts our stories like a ghost, the novel seems to say.

The repetition of ghost imagery, along with the images of darkness, solitude, and silence, throughout Housekeeping accounts for the haunting, or in Freud's term uncanny, mood of the novel. In theorizing the uncanny, Freud analyzes E. T. A. Hoffmann's horrifying tale, "The Sand-Man," in which a boy is terrified by a man who pecks out the eyes of children while they sleep. Likening the fear of being blinded to the fear of castration, Freud concludes by referring "the uncanny effect of the Sand-Man to the anxiety belonging to the castration complex of childhood" (17: 232). The castration anxiety that Freud identifies in fictional representations of the uncanny, i.e. horror stories, connects the uncanny with traditional representations of nostalgia, which are usually characterized by castration images, as I discussed in Chapter Two. Oz is a frightening--uncanny--place for Dorothy because it is not home. And, following Freud, the uncanny effect of Oz, like that of the Sand-Man, refers to the castration complex, or so it seems, considering the images of dismemberment throughout The Wizard of Oz.

In fact, Freud's theory of the uncanny, I would argue, is itself inscribed within the old paradigm of nostalgia. The canny/uncanny opposition is another way of posing the home/not home opposition on which nostalgic longing

depends.⁹ Freud implicitly explains the uncanny in terms of the nostalgic story, the longing to return to a maternal presence:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before", we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the unheimlich is what was heimisch, familiar; the prefix "un" ["un"] is the token of repression. (17: 245)

According to Freud, neurotic men repress the longing to return to the mother's body so that the female genitals, which signify "home," the place of return, become uncanny. That place of return, Heim or home, is subject to narrative, as Freud indicates with the phrases "once upon a time" and "in the beginning," phrases which often begin stories or fables.

⁹ In "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimlich (The 'Uncanny')," Hélène Cixous deconstructs the opposition between heimlich and unheimlich in Freud's text. She argues that in his search for the truth about the uncanny, Freud is ambushed by the uncanniness of his own text which makes an "objective" analysis of the phenomenon impossible. "Everything takes place as if the Unheimlich went back to Freud himself in a vicious interchange between pursued and pursuer; as if one of Freud's repressions acted as the motor re-presenting at each moment the analysis of the repression which Freud was analyzing: the Unheimlich is at the root of Freud's analysis" (526).

Thus, Freud's theory of the uncanny, the unhomely, is a theoretical expression of the nostalgic story which is embedded in our cultural consciousness, a story that Marilynne Robinson rewrites in Housekeeping by creating an "unhomely" character who inhabits a world remote in time and space, and who does not long to return home. Because it seems so unfamiliar, the remote world that Robinson creates may have an uncanny effect, which simply points to the potentially disturbing effect of any view from elsewhere. Fredric Jameson has said that "Defamiliarization, the shock of otherness, is a mere aesthetic effect and a lie" (525). And it may be true that Sylvie, a character who lives in the "millennial present" and who does not long to return "home," could only exist in fiction as the representation of an ideal ontological moment, an ideal which may unsettle anyone concerned with the ugly realities of homelessness. Yet the novel asks us to consider transiency, not homelessness (which would reinscribe the home/homeless opposition to which Sylvie is indifferent), as a metaphor for a place outside the conventional narrative of nostalgic desire. The novel does not advocate a life of transiency for its readers, but asks them to reconsider a few basic assumptions about loss and the stories that we tell to explain our loss. We may not be able to live as painlessly in loss as Sylvie does, but I think that we insiders, those of us who nostalgically keep house, may understand our own longing

better, having known an outsider like Sylvie--whether or not she can only ultimately exist in fiction.

Mother Country

However removed from contemporary experience the fictional world in Housekeeping may be, the ideas in the novel bear up well under the heft of pressing contemporary political realities. Marilynne Robinson's corpus, in fact, raises the issue of the relationship between art and politics in contemporary letters. In February 1988 Robinson opened a public reading from her forthcoming book, Mother Country, by saying that what she was about to read was "not fiction, and I'm so sorry."¹⁰ She was, obviously, sorry that the Sellafeld scandal was not fiction, but also sorry that she was not about to read fiction, as she agreed to do. Several writers in the audience were indignant that she should read non-fiction when she had agreed to read fiction, and one poet left ten minutes before the end of her reading in order to show his disapproval. I recount the incident here because I think that it illustrates a problem that is at the center of Marilynne Robinson's work--that of negotiating the line between fantasy and reality, story and fact.

Robinson's book-length essay Mother Country extends from the fictional to the political realm issues that the

¹⁰ Robinson read at the Creative Writers Festival at the University of Florida, February 1988.

novel Housekeeping raises. Mother Country consists of two parts: Part One, a brief social and economic history of Britain, creates the context for the discussion of Sellafield. Here Robinson argues that the Poor Laws instituted an attitude toward pain, poverty, and profit in Britain which explains the willingness of the British government to pollute and endanger their citizens for profit by dumping deadly plutonium waste into their environment.

Part Two is a detailed account of the British government's nuclear reactor and plutonium reprocessing plant, Sellafield, located in the Lake District. Eager to keep up with nuclear bomb building after World War II, Britain scrambled to build a rather makeshift nuclear reactor (then called Windscale), which was not designed to operate longer than twenty years. Sellafield, considered a "leaky jumble," was built by the British government, is operated by a company owned by the British government (British Nuclear Fuels), and regulated by the British government. The plant is the only one of its kind in the world, so several countries around the world pay Britain to reprocess their plutonium waste. It daily pours plutonium waste through a pipeline into the Irish Sea, where the fish are highly radioactive but fishermen are not prevented from fishing the waters.

Robinson asks why Americans tour England but have never heard of Sellafield: "Is it possible to conclude otherwise

than that our education produces an acculturated blindness which precludes our taking in available, unambiguous information if it is contrary to our assumptions?" (22). Robinson's Mother Country, like her essays and novel, is concerned with exploding assumptions that she believes have allowed Britain to continue devastating the world environment without censure. For instance, the assumption that U.S.-Soviet relations are the biggest threat to the future of the world deflects attention from the behavior of peripheral countries such as Britain, the origin of perhaps the greatest threat to the world's future. And the assumption that Britain is a gentle, law-abiding welfare state has allowed us to ignore the danger it has subjected its citizens to for profit. Robinson is most concerned with the cultural assumptions that support the nostalgic myth which has protected Britain from American censure. Robinson speculates, "I suppose that our situation in America is essentially colonial. As colonists we were the groundlings of other societies, and we are still overawed by the squire, gawkishly eager for a nod or a word" (17). Americans nostalgically romanticize Britain, mother country, so that we cannot see her faults or hold her responsible. For Robinson, then, Sellafeld represents the most atrocious effect of the nostalgic fallacy on this earth: out of our nostalgic awe for mother Britain, we Americans allow her to foul the world's environment.

Petroleuse

In her essay "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy," Robinson claims that she "cannot be a writer of 'political' fiction," because of the nostalgic fallacy inherent in political rhetoric. ("Things were idyllic until the advent of industrialism, as the Left would say, or the decline of the old regime, as the Right would say, or the rise of capitalism, as they would both say together" (35).) Yet Robinson advocates nothing short of a revolution in Mother Country when she says that her book is

essentially an effort to break down some of the structures of thinking that make reality invisible to us. These are monumental structures, large and central to our civilization. So my attack will seem ill-tempered and eccentric, a veering toward anarchy, the unsettling emergence of lady novelist as petroleuse. I have had time and occasion to note the disproportion between my objective and my resources. If I accomplish no more than to jar a pillar or crack a fresco, or totter a god or two, I hope no one will therefore take my assault as symbolic rather than as failed. If I had my way I would not leave one stone upon another. (26)

In characterizing herself as an eccentric petroleuse (the word originally described women who used petroleum to burn public buildings during the May 1871 uprising in Paris), Robinson implicitly aligns herself with Sylvie who, having burned down her own house, is an eccentric petroleuse. Robinson's task in Mother Country, like Sylvie's anarchic gesture as the end of Housekeeping, resembles the task of feminist theory to topple patriarchal structures of thinking.

Sylvie is an ec-centric, literally occupying a place outside a house, figuratively occupying a place outside the structures of family and culture, which is precisely the position of the hysteric, according to feminist theory, which I discussed in Chapter One. In their "exchange" of ideas about hysteria in The Newly Born Woman, Cixous and Clément discuss the ambiguous nature of the power exchange between the hysteric and the structures that frame her. Cixous argues that the hysteric's strength is her ability to live in the place of lack, which threatens to disrupt the "restricted little economy" of patriarchal structures of family and culture.

Clément, on the other hand, doubts that hysterical desire can disrupt either structure, and she rejects Cixous's claim that hysteria "disturbs arrangements," arguing that "it introduces dissension, but it doesn't explode anything at all" because it is already assimilated into the system that it attempts to disrupt. Once again, we are back to the dialectic in feminist theory that I discussed at length in Chapter One: can a female subject resist the structure that frames her? For Cixous, the hysteric is a revolutionary heroine; for Clément, she's a sad victim. If Cixous is right about hysteria, then Sylvie, who resists the system that frames her, and even thrives on that resistance, represents a revolutionary everywoman, and

if Clément is right, then Sylvie occupies a position that may be possible only in fiction.

Cixous has said that "there is no place for the hysteric; she cannot be placed or take place" (156). Having no place, the hysteric feels no longing to return home, feels immune to nostalgic desire, and feels no need to keep house. In the next and final chapter of this dissertation, I will consider the way in which the nostalgic desire in the fiction of another contemporary woman writer, Kathy Acker, is confounded, not by the impossibility of return, but by the hysterical longing to long.

CHAPTER IV
LONGING TO LONG:
KATHY ACKER AND THE POLITICS OF PAIN

Yes. But taking this a bit further, we could say: these books are painful to write and to read, and this pain should lead us toward a place . . . a place of experimentation. What I mean is that they're painful, painful because they're works that move toward an area that's not hollowed out yet, maybe. --Marguerite Duras, Woman to Woman

My self is total pain. --Kathy Acker, Don Quixote

In the midst of her quest to find love, Don Quixote, the narrator of Kathy Acker's novel Don Quixote, returns to her "Home of Childhood" in a scene which follows the structure of the conventional nostalgic narrative, but ultimately subverts that narrative: "When I raised my head, I saw a massive house, a house so grand it seemed to be a force detrimental to the existence of human beings. . . . I have nowhere else to go but home" (91). Don Quixote's quest for love nostalgically leads her to her home of childhood, yet the house ironically appears "detrimental to the existence of human beings," suggesting that her quest for love may be abortive from the start.

In traditional narratives of nostalgic desire, the hero longs to return home to a maternal presence: Dorothy returns to Auntie Em, Sam Lowry in Brazil returns to a woman who has assumed the identity of his mother, and Francis

Phelan in William Kennedy's Ironweed imaginatively returns to his wife who treats him like a son. But in Acker's version of the nostalgic homecoming, the "hero" returns home to an emblem of maternal absence, not presence--her mother's corpse. Having assumed the identity of the young girl Lulu, Don Quixote passes through the rooms of this ominous house until she reaches the end of her nostalgic journey home, a room where her mother lies in a coffin:

In the middle of the floor, my mother lies in a coffin, in the non-possibility of death. The skin of her face is bright green; her hair is yellow; her mouth and eyes are open in a scream.

Around her are lots of flowers. . . .

My mother used to take dexadrine so she could diet and then valium and librium to come down from the dex. . . .

My dead, my suicided mother's mouth is shaped in a scream! (94)

In Acker's rewriting of the nostalgic story, the nostalgic's dream becomes a nightmare as Don Quixote returns home not simply to find to her mother absent, but to find her mother's corpse, an image which is variously repeated, like the return of the repressed, throughout the narrative of Don Quixote's quest.

The repeated image of Don Quixote's mother's corpse serves as a anguishing reminder of the ultimate absence that home signifies, and that Don Quixote will always be abandoned and orphaned by love. "'Everyone,' she explained, here 'is one kind of orphan or another'" (157). Like Don Quixote, Ruthie, the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's

Housekeeping, similarly concludes that our human fate is to be abandoned, that every nostalgic journey home is bound to fail.¹ Yet Robinson's Ruthie, unlike Acker's Don Quixote, willingly and painlessly gives up the longing to return home, which enables her to peer at her family home at a safe distance from her orchard: "The house stood out beyond the orchard with every one of its windows lighted. It looked large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship--a fantastic thing to find in a garden. I could not imagine going into it" (203). In Robinson's revision of the nostalgic story, Ruthie's family house becomes oddly, yet safely, unfamiliar (unlike the threatening family house that beckons Don Quixote within). Having achieved emotional distance from her family home through this "defamiliarization," Ruthie can then burn down the house, symbolically freeing herself from the myth of nostalgic return.

Acker's revision of the nostalgic story is certainly less romantic than Robinson's revision, insofar as Acker's novel represents the painful, alienating effect that the nostalgic myth has particularly on woman. Whereas Ruthie

¹ Ruthie says: "Then there is the matter of my mother's abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and forget us, they are so lost in thoughts of their own, and soon or late they disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise" (215). I discuss this passage in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

and her aunt Sylvie in Housekeeping exist outside the nostalgic myth, choosing to wander homelessly without hope of return, Acker's Don Quixote clings to the ideal, returning to her childhood home only to face the painful realization that the return to the maternal body is impossible, an anguishing return to a corpse. This realization is a source of profound psychic pain, a pain which is directed masochistically onto Don Quixote herself: Don Quixote calls the room where she finds her mother's coffin "the room of my death," which suggests that she identifies with her suicided mother instead of blaming her (94).

In Chapter One of this dissertation I established a theoretical context for this study by addressing a philosophical and political issue that is central to feminist theory today: the problem of defining woman, especially where woman is alienated from narratives of masculine desire. In Chapter Two, I argued that one of these narratives is the nostalgic story in which the hero who journeys away from home longs to return to a maternal presence. While we have taken this nostalgic story of loss to be a universal story of human experience and desire, it is more accurately a reflection of male experience and desire, thus alienating to woman. In Chapter Three, I argued that one contemporary woman writer, Marilynne Robinson, has rewritten the nostalgic narrative in order to

give us "a view from elsewhere," creating a moment and place outside loss, represented by a character, Sylvie, who does not long to return home to maternal plenitude. In Robinson's revision of the nostalgic story, transiency becomes a metaphor for a hypothetical position outside loss, a position which Robinson romanticizes through fiction.

In this chapter I consider how Kathy Acker's revision of the nostalgic story, perhaps more realistically than Robinson's, represents the psychic pain that comes from the realization of the impossibility of return. Whereas in nostalgic narratives such as Brazil or even The Wizard of Oz the impossibility of returning to a maternal presence is marked by images of castration, in Acker's narrative the impossibility of return is marked by fantasies of self-mutililation and masochism. In Acker's novel, the nostalgic longing for reunion and reconciliation is undercut by an antithetical, hysterical longing to live painfully in loss. In this chapter I will consider the tension between nostalgia and hysteria, and the psychic pain that tension entails, as it is manifested aesthetically in Acker's postmodern version of the nostalgic story, but first I will clarify what I mean by "hysteria," using one of Acker's earlier texts to illustrate.

Longing to Long

As I explained in Chapter One, although the hysteric appears to desire satisfaction, she actually wants to remain

unsatisfied. As Lacan says in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis, the hysteric "can sustain her desire only as an unsatisfied desire" (12). Therefore, she demands more of the other than the other can possibly give her. In an article on Freud's Dora and the unconscious structure of hysteria, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains how Lacan "redefined Freud's reading of hysteria" by bringing to Dora's case an understanding of "the residual outcome or effect of language in being" ("Dora and the Name-of-the-Father" 221). Ragland-Sullivan explains, "In Lacan's hands hysteria becomes a masochism that drives a subject with the unconscious goal of remaining unsatisfied as the necessary condition of being" (218-219). We see this painful, masochistic structure of desire represented throughout Acker's work, but it is most obviously (and perhaps simplistically) represented in Janey Smith, the narrator and protagonist of one of Acker's earlier novels, Blood and Guts in High School. Janey's desire is a masochistic desire: at one point in the novel Janey willfully experiences very painful sex with her lover "because she wanted to fuck love more than she felt pain" (21). Later she says, "The thought flashed through my mind that I was getting off on all this. I was a masochist" (20). Janey assumes the identity of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, and writes letters to her lover, "Dimwit," letters which are graphic representations of hysterical desire: "I want to do whatever I can to make you

happy. If you don't want to fuck me, that's OK. If you want to fuck me once a month like you do all your other girlfriends that's OK. I'll do anything so I can keep knowing you" (97-98). Ragland-Sullivan explains that the hysteric is "confronted with an unconscious decision made by the subject of desire (usually) female to cling to her suffering in order to assure the Other of its predominance" ("Dora and the Name-of-the-Father" 214).

According to Ragland-Sullivan, the hysterical "structure depends on guaranteeing the Other of its continuing authority. The hysterical subject is defined, then, as one whose complicitous slavery frames her (his) life" ("Dora and the Name-of-the-Father" 214-215). With respect to Acker's novel, Janey is enslaved by the power of others to define her "identity." Janey has been raped by her father, abused by lovers, taken captive by a Persian slave trader, who eventually uses her as a prostitute. Explaining how she has learned to hate herself, Janey asks rhetorically in one of the most controlled and reasoned moments in the novel: "How do you feel about yourself when every human being you hear and see and smell every day of your being thinks you're worse than garbage? Your conception of who you are has always, at least partially, depended on how the people around you behave towards you" (67). Janey attempts to write her own life's story, trying to free herself from alienating myths of identity--whore,

slave, "garbage"--and trying to write herself into a stable, authentic identity. But as she writes, the narrative gets progressively fragmented, as if to suggest that her identity itself were shattering. "'You, the thing called 'you,' was a ball turning and turning in the blackness only the blackness wasn't something--like 'black'--and it wasn't nothingness 'cause nothingness was somethingness" (55). What is perhaps most painful about Blood and Guts in High School is that Janey never resolves or satisfies her desire, nor ever successfully assumes a stable, if momentarily unified, identity. The hysterical desire that is so starkly represented in her early novel, Blood and Guts in High School, becomes a point of resistance against male narratives of desire--nostalgic desire, in particular--in Acker's recent, more complicated and more accomplished novel, Don Quixote.

Before arguing that hysterical desire may be a point of resistance, I should admit that there are several problems with treating hysteria as a metaphoric embodiment of an philosophical idea in feminist theory. First, feminist theorists risk romanticizing the hysteric's pain: by embracing her as an emblem we somehow "sanitize" her body. In Jane Gallop's terms, for instance, the hysteric represents "an other bisexuality, one that pursues, loves, and accepts both the imaginary and the symbolic, both theory and flesh" (219). Following Gallop's lead, feminist

theorists may have romanticized real psychic pain, for Gallop's description of the hysteric incorporates only two of Lacan's orders--the imaginary and the symbolic--but ignores the third, equally important order--the real. Certainly we need to remember that while the image of a neurosis such as hysteria may symbolize woman's social and political position in patriarchy, the real unconscious effects of hysteria are socially and politically debilitating for actual women, and sometimes psychologically devastating.

Following this line of thought, other critics argue that by elevating the hysteric as everywoman, we embrace a politically disabling model of silence and mad screams. Nina Baym envisions the possibility of taking the metaphor literally when she says, "Actually, 'women' are not resigning themselves to silence and nonspeech; we cannot afford to, and as we enter the public arena in increasing numbers we are not silent, and we do not (publicly) scream. Wishing to speak to effect, we use rational sequential discourse, and evidently, we use it well" (50). The metaphor of hysteria is nonetheless useful insofar as it represents the political position of refusal (such as the refusal to speak an alienating discourse) as well as the pain that position necessarily involves. Mindful of the clinical realities of hysteria and the potential political liabilities of the position, I want to consider how in

literature hysterical desire subverts the master narrative of nostalgia, although not to any utopian effect. That is, I will also consider the psychic pain that arises from unravelling the nostalgic story. Before considering the tensions between nostalgia and hysteria in Acker's narratives, I would like to distinguish theoretically between these two antithetical desires.

Nostalgic Demand and Hysterical Desire

The first and most important distinction to be made between nostalgia and hysteria is that nostalgia exists in the realm of demand, whereas hysteria exists in the realm of desire. For Lacan, desire differs from demand because desire is what a subject unconsciously wants of the Other, and demand is what a subject consciously says she or he wants of the Other.² In terms of this distinction between desire and demand, nostalgia may be considered to exist in the realm of demand because it is an appeal to the Other in narrative, a story that a subject consciously tells about his or her loss (e.g., "I want to return to Kansas"). When

² Ellie Ragland-Sullivan distinguishes between demand and desire when she explains that Lacan translated Freud's theory of the biological drive into need, demand, and desire. "Briefly put, Lacanian 'need' is purely physical and aims at survival. 'Desire' is rooted in the unconscious as a referential 'content' for Desire-as-libidinal function, which is displaced into conscious life. 'Request'--taken psychoanalytically to mean a 'demand' for love or an 'appeal' to the Other(A)--reveals the presence of unconscious Desire and narcissism in conscious life as an intentional pressure within language" (Jacques Lacan 69).

we speak of nostalgia, then, we are speaking of a longing that is constituted in the Symbolic and Imaginary orders: Symbolic, because nostalgia is constituted in language, and Imaginary, because it posits, or hopes for, an imagined and imaged maternal presence. Hysteria, by contrast, is constituted as an desire which eludes conscious articulation.

In the first chapter of their Studies on Hysteria, Breuer and Freud state that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences," since the traumatic cause of hysteria does not fade in the hysteric's unconscious memory (Standard Edition 2: 7). The tendency among feminist theorists who interpret this famous remark about hysteria has been to elevate hysteria exclusively into the realm of narrative. Mary Jacobus, for instance, uses Breuer and Freud's remark in order to compare the hysteric's "story" to literature itself. Jacobus says that "like the 'Hysterics [who] suffer mainly from reminiscences' . . . literature too suffers from reminiscences, forever repeating stories or prior texts whose meaning has been lost" (198). Jacobus personifies literature in order to equate literature's "reminiscences" with the hysteric's reminiscences.³ Not only does this

³ Jacobus's personification of literature is a rhetorical move that is typical of certain contemporary criticism which rejects any notion of subjectivity yet recuperates subjectivity by personifying abstractions--that is, by turning an abstraction into a desiring entity.

rhetorical strategy fail to account for the fact that the hysteric, a human subject, has suffered real, not metaphoric, psychic pain, but the strategy also ignores the difference between unconscious desire and conscious demand, that is, the unconscious desire hidden beyond the hysteric's reminiscences.

Kristeva, like Jacobus, places hysteria in the realm of narrative, in the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, when she compares the hysteric to the woman novelist, quoting, like Jacobus, Freud and Breuer's remark about the hysteric. She says, "women generally write in order to tell their own family story (father, mother and/or their substitutes). When a woman novelist does not reproduce a real family of her own, she creates an imaginary story through which she constitutes an identity: narcissism is safe, the ego becomes eclipsed after freeing itself, purging itself of reminiscences. Freud's statement 'the hysteric suffers from reminiscence' sums up the large majority of novels produced by women" (Marks and de Courtivron 166). Kristeva suggests that the woman novelist writes, not out of a nostalgic longing to recreate a blissful past, but in order to purge painful memories, particularly memories of family.

I would resist any formulation that generalizes about all women writers (or all male writers, for that matter), since each writer tells her own story. Nevertheless, these passages by Jacobus and Kristeva point toward the tension

between nostalgic demand and hysterical desire at work in the narratives of some contemporary women writers. On one level, nostalgia and hysteria include each other since both have to do with the way a subject responds to loss. On another level, hysteria and nostalgia exclude each other because the hysteric wants to live in loss while the nostalgic wants loss repaired. Interpreting differently Freud and Breuer's remark that the hysteric suffers from reminiscences, I would argue that the hysteric's reminiscences (e.g., the repressed memory of a suicided mother's corpse) constitute her pain, whereas the nostalgic's reminiscences (e.g., the fantasized memory of mother) constitute his or her hope.

The tension between nostalgia and hysteria is illustrated further in Juliet Mitchell's comment that women's novels are written in the "discourse of the hysteric." She says, "The woman novelist must be an hysteric. Hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse" (Women 289-90). In other words, the woman novelist writes hysterical discourse in order to negotiate the impasse between being subjected by patriarchy and resisting patriarchy. Yet Mitchell later implies that the novel is a nostalgic form, written by the hysteric woman

novelist. "We have to know where women are, why women have to write the novel, the story of their own domesticity, the story of their seclusion within the home and the possibilities and impossibilities provided by that" (289). If Mitchell's reading of women's novels is accurate, then nostalgia in women's fiction is confounded by the fact that women write "the story of their seclusion within the home." In other words, it would seem that the nostalgic story of the longing to return home would alienate any woman who has historically remained secluded, psychically if not physically, within the home. And for the hysteric who desires to remain unsatisfied, the cultural myth of nostalgia, the longing for restitution, may be only an alienating narrative. Like a tectonics of desire, hysterical desire shifts beneath the nostalgic narrative. A crack in the crust of that nostalgic narrative, I am arguing, is manifested particularly in Kathy Acker's novel Don Quixote.

In Chapter Three, I argued that Marilynne Robinson's revision of the nostalgic story of loss in her novel Housekeeping could be considered part of what de Lauretis in Technologies of Gender describes as the feminist effort "to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives and to define the terms of another perspective--a view from 'elsewhere'" (25). Kathy Acker's fiction might also be considered part of this feminist effort to challenge

dominant cultural narratives, yet Acker approaches the task differently from Robinson. Robinson rewrites the nostalgic narrative only by creating a fictional world far removed from contemporary experience, a world outside politics, cultural history, popular culture. Acker's fictional world, by contrast, is rooted in contemporary experience by references to Hitler, Nixon and Watergate, and the rock star Prince, for instance. Robinson creates a fantasy world over which she appears to have strict artistic control, whereas Acker appears periodically to lose control over her own narrative. For example, in Housekeeping the narrator's mother deliberately drives her car into the lake, but Robinson carefully avoids the word "suicide." Acker, on the other hand, in a language approaching nonsense or madness, repeatedly refers to suicide: "'Loneliness, howl! Real teaching happens via feelings. Howl, the self who fights against suicide'" (159). In Robinson's novel, the house metaphor displaces its referent, the human body. Thus, Sylvie, who I have argued is imaged as a ghost, appears to have transcended the body, and hence, pain. By contrast, the most prominent entity in Acker's fiction is the human body, particularly the human body in pain, which is referred to in graphic terms (e.g., nausea, defecation, ejaculation, sperm, snot). Yet despite these differences, the fiction of Robinson and Acker ultimately achieves the same effect: a radical critique of the nostalgic myth. Whereas Robinson

offers a utopian alternative to the myth, Acker's view is more pessimistic. Acker never answers her own question, is freedom from myth--particularly, the nostalgic myth of return--possible?

"Are Women Pirates or Slaves?"

In Alice Doesn't Teresa de Lauretis argues that the task for women writers and filmmakers is to "work with and against narrative, in order to represent not just the power of female desire but its duplicity and ambivalence" (156). She continues, "This will not be accomplished by (paraphrasing [Roy] Schafer) another normative narrative wrapped around a thematics of liberation. The real task is to enact the contradiction of female desire, and of women as social subjects, in the terms of narrative" (156). Kathy Acker enacts in her fiction what feminist theorists such as de Lauretis have articulated as the crisis of female desire and subjectivity--that is, woman's otherness, her exclusion from narratives of masculine desire, such as the nostalgic story. Acker dramatizes that alienation by writing woman as subject into a traditionally male narrative, the story of the quest. Acker's protagonist quests for, among other things, a single, authentic identity, so she begins her quest by naming herself after Cervantes' knight, Don Quixote. "She decided that since she was setting out on the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail, she ought to have a name (identity). She had to name

herself" (9). Ironically, by taking the name of Don Quixote she assumes the identity of an other, not necessarily her own identity.

Acker represents subjectivity in Don Quixote, as in Blood and Guts in High School, as a point of alienation and confusion for woman whose identity is constructed within male culture by naming, clothing, and through cultural narratives such as the Oedipal story.⁴ While Acker writes herself into the traditionally male narrative as the questing knight, her parodic frame reveals how utterly ludicrous that position is for woman. At the same time that she assumes the position of questing hero, Don Quixote, she exposes the impossibility of assuming that position by, for instance, repeatedly deferring her subjectivity to an other. Don Quixote attempts to tell her own story, but in dreams and visions assumes various identities throughout the narrative: Lulu who has an affair with her professor Schigold; Villebranche, a woman who dresses as a man and has

⁴ Most of Acker's work dramatizes the crisis of the subject in contemporary society. Robert Siegle argues that Acker's novel The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec, like Don Quixote, "studies how capitalism, in reifying all manner of social forms from popular culture to subjectivity itself and all manner of institutions from crime to politics to the art world, distills within gender its special blend of violence, exploitation, and disruption of forces peripheral to its own productive ends. These two perspectives, I think, allow us to see the complexity of the vision Acker offers us of the American present, a vision in which neither a simply semiotic nor purely ideological model of the contemporary subject suffices" (46-47).

an affair with a man dressed as a woman, only to find out that "he(she)" is really a woman; and the young girl Villey, short for Villain, whose mother hates her and drives her to contemplate suicide. Even sexual identity is entirely arbitrary, as Acker's characters float unpredictably between masculine, feminine, and neuter genders. "I can't get my sexual genders straight," says the narrator of Don Quixote who confuses the pronouns "she," "he," and "it" throughout the novel (159).

Furthermore, although Don Quixote supposedly narrates the story of her life, that narration is repeatedly deferred to other storytellers, such as her talking dog. In fact, most of what we know about Don Quixote's life is revealed to us through her dog, her other, who constructs Don Quixote's identity as he tells her life story as if it were his own story. This complicated narrative structure suggests that subjectivity is always deferred to an other, as Don Quixote says when discussing the impossibility of woman's subjectivity with her dog: "'I'm your desire's object, dog, because I can't be the subject. Because I can't be a subject: What you name "love", I name "nothingness."" Yet she adds defiantly, "'I won't not be: I'll perceive and I'll speak'" (28).

Don Quixote's quest for an authentic identity fails as she repeatedly encounters the uncertainty and mutability of the constituents of identity--gender, memory, familial and

cultural history, language. In a dream of her education, her teacher asks her what she knows, but Don Quixote (who has assumed the identity of her dog in this dream), says that she is too young to know. Her teacher replies:

'I'm not asking you about your overlays of memories, like the overlays of culture in Europe, culminating in a decayed seaside hotel whose walls peel away from themselves into the literature they think is supporting them. I'm asking you what you know. What do you know, what do you perceive?"

Don Quixote's quest repeatedly leads her to the realization that she has no true "self" beneath a veneer, like wallpaper, or "overlay" of the alienating effects of family, culture, history, literature. Don Quixote tells her story as if she could rebel against the structures that frame her.

When Don Quixote suggests that pornography (Acker's text has been considered pornographic) incites rebellion, her dog corrects her by stating that all storytelling is revolutionary:

'If pornography,' mused the night [Don Quixote], 'is that which incites its listeners to degeneracy, violence, and rioting questioning, what you're telling me is pornographic. You don't even know how to speak properly.'

'All stories or narratives,' the dog barked, 'being stories of revolt, are revolt.'

'These stories or revolts are especially revolts against parents. Why? Because parents have control, not only over children, but also--to the extent that adults're products of their childhood--over everyone. In order to live or be human, the self must seize control: (146)

According to Don Quixote's dog, who is often more insightful than Don Quixote herself (like Sancho Panza in Cervantes'

version of the tale), storytelling is revolutionary because it is Oedipal and depends on the figurative slaying of authority. The dog instructs Don Quixote, "'In order to find out his identity and to be real, (for knowledge is the same as power), the child must murder his real father" (147).

If all storytelling is Oedipal, then where is woman in this configuration of narrative and desire? De Lauretis asks of narrative: "Whose desire is it that speaks, and whom does that desire address? The received interpretations of the Oedipus story, Freud's among others, leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social order, and source of mimetic violence . . . (Alice Doesn't 112). Acker's experimental novel is "revolutionary" in the sense that it subverts the Oedipal story by writing woman into the position of questing hero.

Part of Don Quixote's quest is to find out whether revolution--hence, freedom--is possible, whether a woman can rebel against the forces of family, culture, history, literature in order to reveal her "true" identity. Don Quixote says, "'I wanted to find a meaning or myth or language that was mine, rather than those which try to control me . . .'" (194). Feminist theory asks, can the female subject resist the cultural, familial, and mythical

structures that frame her, structures that depend on her otherness, or is she bound to be a complicitous slave? In Don Quixote, Kathy Acker asks the question, "Are women pirates or slaves?" (93). Yet the question itself, posed in such dichotomous terms, seems to imprison as much as the structures that frame her. Nevertheless, the question reflects the dichotomous position of woman in relation to alienating structures such as family and culture. In Acker's novel, that alienation is especially apparent where the nostalgic quest narrative collides with hysterical desire.

Homeless Quest

In Don Quixote, Acker rebels against the dualistic terms that form the conventional quest narrative. The quest narrative, de Lauretis argues, is structured by distinctions such as life/death, inside/outside, male/female. She says that the dualistic terms of the quest narrative are

predicated on the single figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In so doing the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she(it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter. (119)

It is easy enough to see this pattern in the nostalgic narratives that I have already discussed. In Homer's tale, for instance, Odysseus is the hero who proves his manhood

through his perilous journey home, then establishes order at home. Penelope represents the "matrix and matter" of that journey home. Acker's novel, however, disrupts the traditional quest narrative by playing with its conventions: the single figure of the hero is fractured into several identities; the boundaries that Don Quixote crosses in her groping nighttime quest are never clear; and the female ground for her quest dissolves in the night.

By inserting a woman into the male quest narrative, Acker's novel collapses the distinctions on which the conventional narrative depends, and overturns the terms of the conventional nostalgic quest for home. Don Quixote's quest is generated by a question of desire--"How can a woman love?" (9)--which leads her nostalgically home. Yet there is no "matrix and matter," no maternal referent, for Don Quixote's aimless, homeless quest:

Don Quixote, along with some dog, descended somewhere. She had no more home. She had left the only land she had ever known--Spain--and there was no land to which she wanted to go, or to which she knew how to go, except wherever she happened to be. As a result, she wasn't quite sure where she was. (125)

Don Quixote's quest "to find love in a world in which love isn't possible" (19) collapses when woman, who does not take place (as Cixous has said of the hysteric), who has no

"home," is inserted into the position of questing hero.⁵ In one of Don Quixote's final visions, she approaches a castle where an "old male creep" asks her the impossible question, "Who are you?:

"Who can I be?" I looked at the victimizer and his victim, who were tied to each other by friendship. I have started to cry and I cannot stop crying,
 for those who, having nothing, homeless, would flee,
 but there is nowhere to flee;
 so we travel like pirates
 on shifting mixtures of something and nothing.
 (187)

First, Don Quixote resists identifying herself as either victim or victimizer, since both form an oppositional relation which perpetuates itself. She then shifts the question of identity to the issue of home. Insofar as home is a referent for Don Quixote's identity, then her homelessness signifies her lack of a centered identity. She then rhetorically recuperates her homelessness by turning it into rebellious piracy. While she wanders like Sylvie and Ruthie in Housekeeping, Don Quixote suffers profoundly for her homelessness, for her seemingly referentless identity.

Toward the end of Acker's novel, Don Quixote sinks into a mad vision, introducing the vision by saying, "Mad language is consciousness in myth." In other words, mad language reflects the subject's awareness, or consciousness,

⁵ Speaking metaphorically about hysteria, Cixous says that "there is no place for the hysteric; she cannot be placed or take place" (Newly Born Woman 156).

of the disjunction between myth and psychic reality, between, for instance, the nostalgic narrative and the impossibility of woman's inserting herself as subject into that narrative. In the passage, the nostalgic longing for the return home to a maternal presence is supplanted by the hysterical desire to remain, painfully, in lack.

'Mad language is consciousness in myth.

'The carcass of wood comically perched on cement paws I call "home". [sic] The style of its hair is corrugated iron that exists in the sun like skins being dried. In the diningroom, nailheads glisten from the rough floor, lines of pine and shadow run across a ceiling; the chairs are phantom; the light leaks out a gray light; the cockroaches buzzing seem about to hurt . . .

"This is vision because it's what I see.

'At the end of time before the morning, when I'm now homeless. When I, now, have no one. A country and a cunt are a lack of alienation. The most essential country in which dream's possible, this lack of alienation given to me needy, restored to my decision to allow neediness and desperation, therefore not restored in spreading tenderness, but given as a nipple. I don't need my actual mother who's dead, but I have the desperation of a baby who must suck her nipple. Restored in desire. (192)

For Don Quixote, the nostalgic return home becomes a return to the corpse of her mother. Thus, Don Quixote's image of "home" is conflated with the image of her mother's coffin--a "carcass of wood" and "corrugated iron" and pine. In the final paragraph of this visionary passage, Acker parodies the nostalgic story in exaggeratedly literal terms. Now the end of night and the end of her vision, Don Quixote is homeless, entirely without a referent for her being, alienated as citizen and woman: "A country and a cunt are a

lack of alienation." Here the ambiguous phrase "lack of alienation" may be read not only as absence of alienation, but also as lack constituted through alienation, in the gap between myth and psychic reality. This lack constituted through alienation, then, replaces the nostalgic longing for the literal maternal body, metonymically figured as "a nipple." Like the hysteric who, as Lacan has said, "can sustain her desire only as an unsatisfied desire," Don Quixote will now nurse on her own desire. Thus, the nostalgic desire for return is displaced by the hysterical desire to desire. "Restored in desire," Don Quixote says at the end of her vision. Yet Don Quixote's restoration in desire is achieved through psychic and physical pain, which suggests that the hysterical subversion of the nostalgic story is accomplished only by a painful masochism.

Masochism and Narrative

De Lauretis begins her chapter "Desire and Narrative" in Alice Doesn't by quoting Laura Mulvey's statement "sadism demands a story" and wonders if, conversely, narrative demands sadism (qtd. in Alice Doesn't 103). She asks, "Are we to infer that sadism is the causal agent, the deep structure, the generative force of narrative?" (103). She continues to argue that insofar as narrative is generated by a question of desire, a quest, then narrative depends on the questing agent's, or hero's, sadistic subjection of the object of his desire. We can illustrate de Lauretis's point

in terms of one of the nostalgic narratives that I have discussed at length in Chapter Two. In Terry Gilliam's film Brazil, the desire of the hero, Sam Lowry, generates his nostalgic quest to return to the maternal body. In order to fulfill his nostalgic desire, he recreates the object of his desire, Jill Layton, into an image of his mother. When she is transformed, he states, "I've killed you. Jill Layton is dead." Although Lowry is speaking metaphorically, within minutes on the screen, Jill Layton is machine-gunned to death by the police.

The closure of the nostalgic narrative, it would seem, rests on the manipulation of the (female) object of nostalgic desire into the idealized image of maternal plenitude and then its subjection to the hero, an act of sadism. Acker's novel Don Quixote rebelliously resists this sadistic narrative movement which subjects "woman." If the conventional narrative movement sadistically subjects woman to the desire of the male hero, then the revolutionary effect of Acker's text depends on her masochistically subjecting woman to the sadism of narrative. "'Masochism is now rebellion--" the narrator Don Quixote says (158). Specifically, masochism is rebellion insofar as it subverts the traditional nostalgic story of loss, by supplanting the desire for restitution with the desire to remain in painful loss. In Acker's hands, the formulation "narrative demands sadism" becomes "narrative demands masochism," a rebellious

gesture against traditional "sadistic" narratives of desire.

Abortion as Trope

The image of abortion in Don Quixote serves as the controlling metaphor for this masochism which subverts the nostalgic narrative. In fact, the entire narrative is framed by Don Quixote's impending abortion. The novel opens in an abortion clinic, where Don Quixote ironically "conceives" her abortive quest:

When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love. How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound. The abortion was about to take place: . . . (9)

Like an aborted fetus, Don Quixote's nostalgic quest for love which brings her "home" to her mother's suicided corpse is already doomed as the story begins. Later in her mad vision, Don Quixote says, "So I am a mass of dreams desires which, since I can no longer express them, are fetuses beyond their times, not even abortions. For I can't get rid of un-born-able unbearable dreams, whereas women can get rid of unwanted children" (194).

In male narratives of nostalgic desire the impossibility of return is figured as castration, a pain that is externalized as coming from without. In Acker's revision of the nostalgic narrative the image of abortion

displaces that of castration, so that the pain of impossibility of return is internalized and turns in masochistically on the subject herself. The image of abortion becomes a trope for the anti-nostalgic narrative when Don Quixote herself identifies with the aborted fetus, having been abandoned by her mother's suicide. Don Quixote calls the room with her mother corpse "the room of my death," as if she were killed or aborted by her mother's suicide. "I am polluted and an abortion," says Don Quixote (83).

Abortion as a trope in Kathy Acker's novel represents the inevitable failure of the nostalgic quest for "home," for the plenitude of the maternal body, and the painful subjection of woman to an alienating myth of nostalgic return. Acker describes Don Quixote and her dog in the midst of their quest to find love:

And so a nameless dog and Don Quixote went away, one with the other. They saw blood wherever they went, bloody abortions screaming with pain that anaesthetics only drive under the surface of consciousness, blood hidden under the clean white male weaponry. They clutched at their memories which were now skeletons moldering on the desert of blood. These memories of America decayed. They no longer knew what they had left. Loneliness-being-lost and lack of liberalism threw themselves upon the Night and her companion like pleasure, like the bliss of a throbbing red cunt dawn. (125)

Unlike Marilynne Robinson, whose critique of the nostalgic myth is abstracted from the body, from the real, Acker typically roots her language in the body which "belongs to

the rhetoric of the real" (Export 4). When Acker inserts woman into the myth of the questing knight, a myth which painfully alienates her, the romantic image of the knight and his companion disappearing into the rosy horizon at dawn is graphically rewritten in terms of a woman's body in pain and, ironically, in pleasure.

"The Discourse of Blunted Pain"

In her essay, "The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Works of Marguerite Duras," Julia Kristeva says that Marguerite Duras's novels express the "invisible crisis of identity" and psychic pain brought about by the brutality of World War II, and the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Duras's novels, like Acker's, attempt to represent the painful unravelling of female subjectivity (in The Ravishing of Lol Stein, for instance), and the alienating effects of the nostalgic myth of return to maternal plenitude (in The Lover, for example). Kristeva argues that in order to represent such pain, Duras distorts the language of her novels, "making it grate, rendering it awkward and clumsy" (140). "In that sense," Kristeva says, "the stylistic awkwardness in Duras is the discourse of blunted pain" (140).

Certainly, the same could be said of Kathy Acker's language, which refuses to compensate (as Marilynne Robinson's language compensates) in beauty and rhythm for the utter anguish that her text imparts. Kristeva says that

the contemporary "poet--clearly marginalized by political domination in the modern world--turns toward his or her proper home in language and displays its resources rather than naively attack the representation of the external object" (139). Kristeva suggests that the "poet" might nostalgically return "home" in language, finding compensation for loss in the beauty of his or her words. Yet Acker's text--with its fragmented sentences and paragraphs, its grating obscenity--precludes even an aesthetic return home.

I have been arguing in this dissertation that women writers such as Marilynne Robinson and Kathy Acker are in the midst of rewriting the nostalgic story which is painfully alienating to woman but may also be one narrative that is most entrenched in our cultural consciousness. It seems clear that challenging the nostalgic story is rather like unwrapping a wound and staring directly at the source of pain. Of her own novels, Marguerite Duras has said, "these books are painful to write and to read, and this pain should lead us toward a place . . . a place of experimentation. What I mean is that they're painful, painful because they're works that move toward an area that's not hollowed out yet, maybe" (Duras and Gauthier 6). What are we left with besides the pain that comes from experimentation, from hollowing out new spaces of discourse? Marilynne Robinson leaves us with a character who lives

outside loss, although Robinson's utopian vision of an ontological ideal may be possible only in fiction. Kathy Acker at least leaves with the humor that comes from excruciating self-consciousness, although laughter in her novels always reverberates with the nervousness of madness. Certainly, this new territory that women writers are staking out has its dangers, but we might find hope in the possibilities at the horizon.

CONCLUSION

I hear you call my name,
And it feels like home.
--Madonna, "Like a Prayer"

I have been arguing in this dissertation that the traditional nostalgic story is alienating for woman and that women writers such as Marilynne Robinson and Kathy Acker are trying to rewrite that nostalgic story. Part of the problem of the nostalgic story is that it fantasizes woman as mother, or "lost territory," in such a way that woman is subjected to and held responsible for the nostalgic hero's failed quest. In feminist revisions of the nostalgic story, the mother is neither rejected nor erased (nor blamed as she is in some masculine narratives of nostalgic desire). The burden is simply lifted from her: abandonment is inevitable, says Robinson; everyone is an orphan, says Acker. Yet in looking at the works of these two writers, we encounter a contradiction: Marilynne Robinson's novel seems to tell us that it is possible to live outside the nostalgic myth, whereas Kathy Acker's novel, in its graphic representation of psychic pain, seems to warn us about the dangers of living outside that myth. The nostalgic return has always been imaged as a return to a maternal presence,

both in traditional nostalgic narratives such as Brazil and in subversive stories such as Robinson's Housekeeping and Kathy Acker's Don Quixote.

We might be able to negotiate this contradiction between the pain of believing the nostalgic myth and the pain of giving it up more easily if we understand its source, which may well be in the way the mother has been figured in Western literature. But in theorizing motherhood we must beware of the tendency to perpetuate the nostalgic fallacy by romanticizing the mother. I am thinking, in particular, of Julia Kristeva's nostalgia for a cult of motherhood, which she argues has been lost in through the secularization of our culture. Kristeva is especially concerned that feminism has rejected motherhood. In "Stabat Mater" she says, "Now, when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse, feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows. The result? -- A negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups" (Kristeva Reader 161). At the end of this essay, Kristeva nostalgically argues that feminism return to motherhood in the interests of survival, and reformulate an ethics that gives law "flesh, language, and jouissance" (185). Such a reformulation, she says, "demands the contribution of women. Of women who harbour the desire to

reproduce (to have stability). Of women who are available so that our speaking species, which knows it is mortal, might withstand death. Of mothers" (185). Underlying Kristeva's nostalgic turn toward motherhood is a unsettling homophobia, which I take to be one of the dangers of the nostalgic veneration of motherhood within Kristeva's feminism.

Kristeva is more brutally judgmental in her theorizing of lesbian sexuality than Freud ever was. In About Chinese Women she says that lesbian desire is based on a sadistic obliteration of the vagina and an imaginary acquisition of the penis, with which the lesbian gains access "to the symbolic mastery which is necessary to censor the pre-Oedipal stage and wipe out all trace of dependence on the mother's body" (Kristeva Reader 149). "Intellectual or artist," Kristeva says of the adult lesbian, "she wages a vigilant war against her pre-Oedipal dependence on her mother, which keeps her from discovering her own body as other, different, possessing a vagina" (149). Kristeva's call for a new ethics of motherhood in response to "the rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups" necessarily excludes the lesbian who, in Kristeva's view, wages war against her pre-Oedipal mother. The implications of Kristeva's nostalgic veneration of motherhood (here, her homophobia) are indicative of the trouble that any nostalgic theory is bound to encounter. In this dissertation I have interrogated the nostalgic narrative as it is represented in

fiction, but I think that the same sort of interrogation could be made of contemporary theories of language, subjectivity, and culture.

I focus on Kristeva here because she is the most nostalgic contemporary theorist. At the end of her essay "Extraterrestrials Suffering for Want of Love," Kristeva says: "Today Narcissus is an exile, deprived of his psychic space, an extraterrestrial with a prehistory bearing, wanting for love. An uneasy child, all scratched up, somewhat disgusting, without a precise body or image, having lost his specificity, an alien in a world of desire and power, he longs only to reinvent love. The ET's are more and more numerous. We are all ET's" (Tales of Love 382-383). We may all be ET's, one way or another longing for home, but as men and women we have been telling different stories about the world we lost and about the way home.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Teresa M. Brown was born in Anchorage, Alaska, but spent most of the first eight years of her life in Southern California where avocado trees blossomed in her backyard and the sun shone every day and trucks with varnished wood drawers lined with doughnuts passed by her house every now and then. When she was eight, her family moved to Bangkok, Thailand, very near the Viet Nam war. There she realized that nothing would ever be quite the same. Now she dreams of lemon trees and skateboards and soft grass beneath her bare feet.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Anne Goodwyn Jones
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Chair
Associate Professor of
English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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